ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY

THE BEST WILD WEST STORIES PUBLISHED

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1906, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Avenue, N. Y. Application made at the N. Y. Post Office for entry as Second-class Matter.*

No. 140 NEW YORK, DECEMBER 22, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

KING OF THE WILD WEST'S TREASURE

or Stella in the Halls of Montezuma

The untold wealth of Montezuma, the great Aztec emperor, lay at their feet. It was so dazzling and stupendous as to be incredible.

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King of the Wild West's Treasure;

OR,

STELLA IN THE HALLS OF MONTEZUMA.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

TED'S PREMONITION COMES TRUE.

"It's a strange thing the way I keep thinking of Don Dorrington," said Ted Strong, King of the Wild West.

He and Bud Morgan were riding across the big pasture at the Moon Valley Ranch, and Ted broke a long silence by making this remark in a musing way, apropos of nothing.

Bud looked at Ted out of the corner of his eye, wondering what had come over his pard, for he had been moody and silent all day.

"How's that?" asked Bud.

"There is either something the matter with Don, or I'm going to hear from him soon," continued Ted, as if he had not heard Bud.

"H'm!" grunted Bud.

"He came into my mind at noon yesterday, and followed me all afternoon. Do what I would, I couldn't get rid of him."

"Why didn't yer hev him pinched?" queried Bud. "By jinks, I b'lieve he's talkin' in his sleep, er he's plumb dippy," he muttered to himself.

"Last night I dreamed of him. He came to my bed and stood looking at me intently. I hope nothing has happened to him. I shall be anxious until I know," continued Ted, talking to himself, his chin sunk upon his chest.

"See here, Ted, wake up," said Bud, laughing. "Yer talkin' in yer sleep."

"Have I been talking?" said Ted, rousing himself. "I was thinking of Don Dorrington. You remember him, Bud. He was a civil engineer on the San Saba irrigating canal in Arizona. He was a fine chap, too."

"Shore I remember him," exclaimed Bud. "Anything happened to him?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought of him for months, but now I can't get him out of my mind. When I get a person on my mind that way I am going to hear from him or about him."

"Well, I hope 'twill be good news, an' somethin' excitin', fer things hev been so slow lately that I'm gittin' moldy."

Nothing more was said about Dorrington between the two, although Ted dreamed about his friend during the night, and awoke worried.

While they were at breakfast one of the boys rode over from Soldier Butte with the mail-bag, and among the letters it contained was one which Ted held up, with a laugh.

"Here it is, Bud," he cried, waving above his head an envelope, on the upper left-hand corner of which was

printed, "Don Dorrington, Civil and Mining Engineer, 801, O—— Street, St. Louis, Mo."

"It shore come true, what yer was sayin'," said Bud. "That's his handwrite. I hope he ain't dead none."

"What are you talking about?" said Ben Tremont, as the boys laughed at Bud's bull.

"Well," said Bud, grinning, "I guess he's all right, unless he's died since he writ thet."

Ted had been skimming rapidly through the letter, smiling occasionally as he turned over the pages.

"All right," he exclaimed at last. "He's not dead, but exceedingly alive, and apparently in the best of spirits, but he puts up a proposition that certainly is wild, if it is not woolly."

"What is it? Spit it out," said Bud impatiently. "Ye've been gassin' ter me fer a couple o' days, an' ye've cleared up ther mystery, yet thar yer sit like a Chessy cat an' me with ther vitals bein' eat out o' me by anxiety."

"I'll read you the letter, if you like," said Ted, with a comprehensive glance around the table.

"Go ahead!" cried the boys.

"You bet, we're all in a hurry to hear anything about Don," said Ben Tremont.

"Then here goes:

"'DEAR TED, and all the old skates at Moon Valley, and especially that old Highbinder called Bud—although he looks to me more like an overripe turnip gone to seed than a mere bud——'"

"Wow!" exclaimed Ben, as the laughter following this beginning had subsided. "Wouldn't that make you good for a whole week?"

"All right, all right," said Bud. "That's er promisin' start. See if he gits any worse ez he proceeds."

"'Probably you will wonder at this after the long interval between letters, but I have been thinking about you for several days, and something impels me to write you, and tell you what is on my mind—and it is something more substantial than hair this time.

"'I have recently returned from old Mexico, after a series of adventures that nearly cost me my life, and caused me to be chased out of the land of the eagle and the snake at the point of a bayonet, and I crossed the Rio Grande just two jumps ahead of a Mauser bullet.

"'Well, here I am settled down in St. Louis, practising my profession, but making bad work of it because I can not keep my mind off Mexico, and a secret that I learned while there. My boy, "there's millions in it," as Mulberry Sellers said, but I don't know how to get at them.

"'That is why I am writing to you. If anybody can get at it I am convinced you can. I guess that is why I have been thinking so much about you lately. In a nutshell, it is this: *Treasure*, in letters a foot high.

"'I brought my aunt back with me from Mexico City, along with her family. You remember I told you that she had married a Mexican banker named Figuero. Well, he's dead, and as she is an American, she's got a hankering for the old States in spite of her wealth and stately mansion in the Mexican capital, and elected to come North and keep house for me. It was she who first put me next to the treasure. She found out about it from her husband's papers. There is somebody connected with the government of Mexico who is intensely interested in the matter as well, and when he suspected that I was on to it he brought his batteries to bear on me, and although I was under contract with a big American concern, which has a rich franchise from Mexico, I was told to kick dust in the direction of El Paso and American soil, and not to stop to pick cherries on the way.

"'Well, I didn't stop, but got out over the roofs at midnight with a bunch of soldiers and comic-opera policemen barking at my heels. When I got within sight of good old American soil, which looks greener and prettier than any other on earth, I was met by a stampede of rurales, and if the nigger porter of the sleeper hadn't concealed me in a linen-closet full of musty sheets I reckon I'd still be on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande River, with a cactus growing on top of me, and me underground.

"'But this is not what I started to tell you. I want you and the boys to come here, and join me in an invasion of Mexico. I don't mean by that that I want to start a revolution and have myself proclaimed president, or anything of that sort, but I have a scheme in which there will be plenty of excitement, and simply wads of money. Suppose you come on and visit me for a day or two and hear me talk. I wouldn't dare put on paper what I have to tell you. The town is full of Mexican spies and detectives, and I can't turn my head without seeing one. They do nothing to disturb me, but I am conscious of being watched every minute.

"'I live out on Newstead Avenue. Take the Laclede Avenue car at the station to Newstead, then turn north, or to your right as you get off the car, and go half a block. You can't miss the house. The porch is covered with a flowering vine with red blossoms on it, so that from the car it looks as if we'd hung a red blanket out to dry. I'm doing my work at home now to get some relief from those greaser detectives, and yet as I write I look out of my window and see one of them lounging in the shade of a tree across the street, looking directly up at my window.

"'Come, and I'll put you onto something that will make your eyes roll clear over in their sockets. This is good dope I am giving you, and when you hear the sad, sweet story of my life in Mexico you will be as wildly enthusiastic as I am, or you have changed so that I will not be able to recognize you without a letter of introduction from that old long-haired buccaneer of the Spanish Main, Bud Morgan. Well, I'll quit, or I'll wear out my welcome. Your pard on the San Saba.

"'DON DORRINGTON.

"'P. S.—Say, do you remember that Mexican engineer I caught copying my profile drawings and threw into the San Saba ditch, where he stuck in the mud all night, and until the next noon, when you came along and threw a rope over him and snaked him out? Well, I met him in Mexico City working for a rival company, and he tried to slip a knife between my ribs in the hotel one night. He'd have done it, too, if it hadn't been for a fellow named Captain Tosta, who is on the staff of President Diaz. Tosta is a bully fellow, clever at all sorts of juggling feats, a ventriloquist, and that sort of thing—the most entertaining man I know. He speaks perfect English, and seems to know every nook and cranny of the States. I thought I saw him on the street here the other day, but I guess I was mistaken. I hope to introduce you to him one of these days. So long.

"'DON D.'"

"Well, he sure is an awful pore letter-writer," drawled Bud, as Ted finished reading and folded up the letter. "He don't seem ter hev a word ter say."

"What do you think of it, boys," said Ted.

"Looks to me as if there was something big behind it," said Ben. "Don was always the greatest fellow to be picking up good things and turning them over to other fellows to work out. You remember the mine he ran across while he was on the San Saba work, and almost literally gave it away because he was so much interested in that old ditch that he didn't have time to work it."

"Yes, Don has a great head if he didn't get so all-fired enthusiastic," said Ted.

"That's a pretty good fault sometimes," said Kit, who was an enthusiast himself.

"Then you think it would be worth my while to take a flier to St. Louis to find out what it is all about, and if there is anything in it to send for you?" asked Ted.

"Sure!" shouted the boys in unison.

"Then I'll start in the morning."

CHAPTER II.

LOST! A SAPPHIRE CHAIN.

Ted did not think it worth while to notify Don Dorrington of his coming, as he had such plain directions for finding the house that an escort was not necessary.

As he passed through the gate on his way from the train to the big noisy waiting-room of the St. Louis Union Station he saw, standing in the line of people who were waiting to greet friends from the train, a man of very dark complexion, evidently a foreigner, and probably a Mexican. As Ted glanced at him he thought he detected a sudden flare in the eyes of the foreigner that betokened recognition, but it was gone in an instant.

This caused Ted to look at the man a second time to impress his features and other characteristics on his memory. He observed that the man had unusually light-colored eyes for a Mexican, or one of Latin blood, and that he wore a rather short, forked beard, jet-black in color and evidently carefully groomed. On his head was an expensive Panama hat, and his clothes were made of some fine white cloth.

"Since he seems to be interested in me I'll try not to forget him in case I should meet him again," said Ted to himself, as he threaded his way through a pushing throng to the street..

A Laclede Avenue car was waiting, and he boarded it, casting a glance over his shoulder as he did so.

The foreigner with the forked beard was standing on the edge of the sidewalk watching him with intentness, but as soon as he caught Ted's eye he turned abruptly and walked away.

"That chap is certainly very much interested in me," thought Ted. "I wonder who he is."

When the conductor called "Newstead Avenue," Ted left the car, turned to his right, and a short distance away saw the red blanket of flowers which Don had described, and walked rapidly toward it.

As he approached the house he saw a man step from behind a porch farther down the street, look at him closely for a moment, and hurry away.

This man also was a Mexican; swarthy, picturesque in his foreign-looking clothes and in the twist of his small, black mustache. Somehow he reminded Ted of the Mexican he had seen at the station. He was of the same build, had light eyes, and the only difference that Ted could distinguish between them was that the second spy, for so Ted promptly designated both, had no beard, and wore a blue instead of a white coat.

As Ted put his finger on the button to ring the door-bell, the man slipped swiftly around the corner, and a moment later Ted heard the "chug-chug" of a motor-car, then the whirr of its wheels and machinery as it departed swiftly in the direction of the city.

Ted had not ceased to wonder at these things when the door opened and a man servant in the garb of a Mexican, with slashed trousers, a short jacket, and sash, stood upon the threshold, bowing politely.

"Does Mr. Dorrington live here?" asked Ted, in Spanish.

The Mexican showed his teeth in a smile of welcome, and bowed Ted into the hall, taking his bag from him, and motioning him politely into a small parlor off the hall.

The servant then retreated without explanation or excuse, taking the bag with him.

The room was newly furnished in American style, except that the walls were covered with Mexican draperies and curios, which gave it an air half-civilized and half-barbaric.

Ted was so intent upon a group of weapons hanging over one of the doors that he did not notice the entrance of a lady, who stopped within the parted curtains and observed him closely, before she advanced softly.

"Is this Mr. Strong?" she said, in a pleasant voice, coming toward him with outstretched hand.

"My name is Ted Strong, and you, I presume, are Don Dorrington's aunt," he replied, stepping forward to meet her.

"I am very glad to meet you," said the lady. "I am señora, or perhaps here it would be better to call me Mrs. Figuero. I have heard Don speak of you so often that I seem to know you already."

She was very gracious, and soon had Ted talking about the Moon Valley Ranch and the boys, and their various exploits. Some of these she had heard of, and their chat was so absorbing that Ted had forgotten the nature of his errand and why he had come so far to see Don Dorrington.

He thought of him at last, and wondered why he had not appeared, inasmuch as he had written Ted that he did his work at home.

He was just about to ask after Don when Señora Figuero, evidently reading inquiry in his face, said:

"I suppose you wonder why Don is not here. He asked me to receive you, and ask you to forgive him for not being here to welcome you, but I think he will not be gone long. In the meantime, I will have my niece, Señorita Asturias, come in and entertain you while I attend to some household duties. She came with me from Mexico to make a short visit."

Señora Figuero left the room, and returned in a few minutes with a tall, graceful girl, to whom she introduced Ted.

SeñoritaAsturias, while not strictly beautiful, was of the dashing type. She had an abundance of black hair arranged in a coquettish manner, and she had the dash and go of the daughters of the South. Her dress was of the Mexican style, black lace over yellow silk, which

emphasized the dark brilliancy of her eyes and complexion.

She spoke English with apparent difficulty, and with an accent that was evidence that she was not used to speaking it.

"I speak Spanish, if you would rather use that than English," said Ted, after the brief greetings were over.

The girl looked gratefully at him, and said in her own tongue:

"I should like to speak English better, but, while my aunt and cousin speak nothing but English at home here, I find it very difficult to learn. It is so much harsher than Spanish."

As spoken by Señorita Asturias, Ted was forced to agree that Spanish was a far more beautiful language than his own.

"How do you like the United States?" asked Ted.

"Not at all, if you will pardon me for being so frank," she replied. "I do not feel safe here. I never go out but I am followed by spies. Why, I do not know, unless it is on account of my cousin Don Dorrington, who got into some trouble in Mexico City, the nature of which I do not clearly understand. There, look out of the window. Do you see that man standing across the street watching the house? He is there nearly all the time—he or some one else, and they follow Don whenever he leaves the house. It makes me afraid to have those men watching the place. I am afraid they mean mischief for us."

"I believe I'll go out and see what the fellow is up to," said Ted. "I saw one of them watching me when I came up to the house. I don't like to be followed and spied upon. Look out at the window, and see what he does when I go out."

"All right," answered Señorita Asturias. "But I think he will run when he realizes that you are going to speak to him."

Ted put on his hat and walked rapidly across the street toward the Mexican, who was standing beneath a tree lazily smoking a cigarette.

He looked up when Ted was about half-way across the street, and throwing away his cigarette began to walk rapidly away.

"Wait a minute, señor," called Ted. "I want to speak to you."

Without reply the Mexican increased his speed to a rapid walk, and when Ted continued to follow him, broke into a run, and dashed around the corner.

Ted took after him, but when he reached the corner it was to see the Mexican leap into a white motor-car that was standing near the curb. The chauffeur applied the power, and the car dashed smoothly and swiftly over the asphalt, and was out of sight around the next corner before Ted reached the spot where it had stood.

"It's a mighty strange thing about these Mexicans," thought Ted. "I wonder how many of them there are, or is there only one who disguises himself every time he comes out? I wonder, also, what Don has done to make himself an object of espionage."

When he returned to the house he was admitted by the man servant, and again bowed into the parlor.

Señorita Asturias was not there. Ted thought she had left the room for a moment and would return. But he continued to sit there alone, thinking that it was a strange household, and one of mystery, and wishing that Don Dorrington would appear and appease his curiosity.

He had about lost patience, and was thinking of leaving the house and returning later when Don should have returned, when he heard the well-known voice of his friend in the hall.

"Is he in the parlor, aunt?" he heard Don say. "Why didn't you have him shown to my den?"

Dorrington burst into the room, clasping Ted by both hands with warm expressions of welcome.

"Awfully glad to see you, old fellow," he exclaimed heartily. "I didn't expect you so soon. I must have excited your curiosity to have brought you in such a hurry. I was looking for a wire from you."

"I didn't think it was necessary," said Ted. "Your directions for finding the house were so explicit that I couldn't miss it."

"Well, come out to my den, and we'll talk matters over, and then have some luncheon and I'll introduce you to my cousin Nina Asturias, if she hasn't gone out."

"I've already had the pleasure of meeting her," said Ted.

"What do you think of her?"

"She's a fine-looking girl, and I think she looks a good deal like you. That is, there is a strong family resemblance."

"So my aunt says, but I confess I can't see it myself. But I hope you will be good friends. I am very fond of her. She is like a sister to me."

"You're a lucky chap."

"Glad you think so. But come along, for I have a good deal to say to you in explanation of my letter."

Dorrington led the way down the hall, and Ted saw that he had not changed much since the days they were together on the San Saba. He was still the hearty, genuine chap, supple of body, slender at the hips and broad of shoulder, and he had an extraordinarily graceful carriage for a man.

At the end of the hall he opened a door, and ushered Ted into a room that was littered with books and papers and surveying-instruments. Near the window was a drawing-table littered with scraps of paper on which were sketches and rows of figures.

On the wall facing the chair into which Ted dropped was a large colored map, or, more properly, diagram of roads or paths crossing one another and twisting about in an apparently inextricable fashion.

Here and there they opened into square or oval spaces, from which a dozen passages or paths diverged.

"Looks like the plan for a maze," said Ted, laughing, getting up to examine it more closely.

"It is," said Dorrington, "and one of the most remarkable ever designed and executed by man."

"Is this what you wrote me about?" asked Ted.

"The very thing. There is the grave of the treasure I wrote about," said Dorrington, placing his finger on a square space on the diagram.

"And what is it?"

"These are the halls of Montezuma. Here was his hidden palace, and the treasure-vaults of the ancient Aztecs."

"Great Scott, how do you know all this?"

"I found it, and surveyed it all myself, entering it like a burglar in the night, and constantly in danger of being discovered and murdered."

"You found the treasure?"

"I did. Look at this, and tell me what you make of it."

Dorrington unlocked a drawer in a desk and drew out a package, wrapped loosely in a piece of newspaper. It clanked musically as he unwrapped the paper. Ted was bending over him as the package lay on the drawing-board close to the window.

The paper came open, and there lay a chain of golden links, each link separated from the next by a sapphire roughly set in silver.

"By Jove, that is magnificent!" exclaimed Ted. "That must be worth something."

"I have no idea what it is worth. It was a minor piece of jewelry that I brought out on one of my trips merely to show it to my aunt, and convince her that I had really found something. I suppose that it was a neck-chain. See, here is a rude clasp, and when it is hung around the neck it reaches almost to the waist."

He put it around his neck, and fastened it to show Ted the use to which probably it had been put.

Suddenly something came between them and the light, and Ted looked to see a dark face pressed against the window. It was the face of the Mexican he had chased away from in front of the house a short time before.

His sudden and alarmed exclamation at seeing the man attracted Dorrington's attention to the window, and he saw the face just as it disappeared.

"After him!" cried Dorrington, leaping across the table and throwing open the window, while Ted dashed out of the room and along the hall to the front door.

Dorrington's den looked out upon an alley which ran through the block from street to street. Ted had observed it before, and his idea in running to the front door was that he might catch the fellow who had looked in at the window as he emerged into the street.

But when he got there the Mexican was almost at the corner of the street, running like a deer.

Ted took after him, and at the mouth of the alley was joined by Dorrington.

"Don't let him get away!" cried Dorrington. "He is the fellow I have been waiting and watching for. I need him."

But when they reached the corner the white automobile was speeding far down the street.

"That is the third time he's got away from me," panted Dorrington, as he watched the spy disappear far down the street.

"I chased him away from in front of the house a little while ago," said Ted. "Who is he?"

"He is Lieutenant Losteros, chief of the Mexican secret service, and the man who chased me out of Mexico, after trying to murder me."

"Where is the chain?" cried Ted, looking at Dorrington with a startled expression on his face.

Dorrington put his hand to his neck. The chain was gone.

"Let us hurry back," he cried. "I must have dropped it when I jumped out of the window."

They ran back to the alley, searching the ground over which they had come closely, but the sapphire chain was nowhere to be found.

"What is that?" cried Ted, pointing to the far end of the alley.

A man was running rapidly down the alley toward the street, looking over his shoulder occasionally.

When he was near the street, a motor-car drew up and stopped. The runner jumped into it, and the machine rushed away.

"There goes the sapphire chain," cried Dorrington.

CHAPTER III.

BENEATH AN EMPEROR'S PALACE.

"It's a great pity that you lost the emerald chain," said Ted, when they had returned to the room.

"I don't care so much for the loss of it, so far as its intrinsic value is concerned," said Dorrington. "But it is a bad piece of business to let it fall into the hands of Losteros."

"How is that? Why should it be an added misfortune for it to go to him?"

"Because it is proof to the government of Mexico that I have found a treasure, a thing which I have only been suspected of before."

"Then these spies from Mexico have been haunting you for that purpose, eh?"

"None other, I think. But this is putting the story to you hindside foremost."

"I wish you would tell me all about it. You have excited my curiosity greatly. The presence of these spies is what made you hesitate about writing anything to me of the details, I suppose."

"That is the truth. I couldn't even trust the mails with that, for these Mexicans are very resourceful, and the matter is of so much importance to them that they would go to any extreme to find out what they think I know."

"That is, the existence of a vast treasure in Mexico."

"That's it."

"How did you stumble upon it?"

"It was not a question of stumble at all. I worked it all out during the year I was in Mexico, and verified it after I came here."

"Is there any doubt about it?"

"Not the slightest. The treasure is there, for I have seen it, but I could not carry it away without being instantly discovered, and that would have meant the end for me.

"You see, it was like this: For a great many years it has been known to antiquarians and to the Mexican Government that a vast treasure in gold and silver and jewels was concealed somewhere within the limits of Mexico, or on its southern borders. Adventurers and persons employed by the government have spent years searching for it. The government needed the money in its exchequer, and whoever discovered the hiding-place of the hoard would instantly be made to disgorge. Well, I found it."

"Accidentally, I suppose."

"Not by any means. My aunt's husband, as I told you in my letter, was a banker. He was descended from one of the oldest and richest families in the republic, and inherited the banking business, which had been in the possession of the family for many years, from his father.

"He was educated in this country and in Europe, and was a very scholarly man. He cared more for his books and studies than for business, and as the bank was so old and so well established he could leave its management to the men who had been in it since their boyhood, while he devoted himself to his antiquarian studies.

"He had always been greatly interested in the discoveries of the old Aztec civilization, and one day while looking over some old papers that had belonged to his great-grandfather, which he found in a vault far below the walls of the bank, he came upon a remarkable document.

"This document had been written on a piece of parchment by one of the priests who had come over with Cortez and his Spanish conquerors, for one of Señor Figuero's ancestors was a Spanish officer of that time.

"This paper hinted at a vast treasure which had been hidden by the Aztecs. The Spaniard had the news from the Emperor Montezuma himself, interpreted and set down by the priest. Shortly after that the great Montezuma died in his palace, and his body was thrown into the street by his successor, Quitlahuac. It was picked up by his servants and cremated, but the urn containing his ashes, coming into possession of the new emperor, was ordered thrown into the lake.

"The priest discovered later that this had not been done, and was told that it had been deposited in the imperial burying-ground. Where this was the Spaniards did not know, but it was known that they had captured an immense treasure from the Aztecs, which afterward disappeared, and was thought to have been buried with the ashes of the great emperor in the secret vaults which had been the burial-places and treasure-houses of the Toltecs, of whom the Aztecs are supposed to have been the descendants.

"Accompanying this parchment was a rude drawing made by the priest showing a hill honeycombed with passages or caves, walled up and covered with roads so that their presence would not be discovered.

"These papers Señor Figuero took to his home to study, and show to his wife. He showed them to me, also, and together we studied them, for I was then living in his house. But we could make nothing out of them except the confirmation that there was a treasure, that it was enormous, and that it was buried in a honeycombed rock.

"Somehow or other, we never knew how, the Mexican Government got wind of the fact that my uncle, for such he was by marriage, knew of the existence of the treasure, and it was suspected that he knew of its whereabouts, also. He was cautiously approached by persons in the Mexican secret service, and asked to give up the papers and whatever information he had. But he steadily refused to do this, and he was too rich and too important a man to coerce by threats.

"One night he found some one in his bedroom, evidently a burglar, searching all the trunks, boxes, and desks in the room. My uncle arose, and in the struggle with the burglar was stabbed. He had just strength enough to cry out and summon my aunt to his side before he died. He told her of the visit of the burglar, and whispered his name, and where she could find the papers. He said that he hoped his family would avenge his death."

"Do you know the name of the man who entered the house and murdered him?" asked Ted, who had followed the story with intense interest.

"My aunt did not reveal it to me for some time afterward, and when she did it came with a shock to me, for it was that of a man who had been a great friend of my uncle, who had done him many good turns. Yes, she told me the name of the coward, and you have seen him this morning."

"You don't mean Losteros!"

"The very same. He is a bad man, and my uncle's blood will be on my conscience until I have avenged him."

"What did you do after the death of your uncle?"

"My aunt turned the papers over to me to do with them as I wished. You may well believe that they interested me greatly. I began to study them anew, and, aided by my engineering knowledge, I came to the conclusion that I had at last found the location of the Aztec secret vaults. But it was, perhaps, in the most carefully guarded place in all Mexico. In fact, none other than the very residence of the President of Mexico."

"Whew! The palace of President Diaz, eh?"

"Yes, in the very Rock of Chepultepec."

"How in the world did you ever discover it?"

"You will remember that the manuscript and the drawing said that the treasure-house and the imperial burying-ground were in a rock. I knew, of course, that the operations of Cortez and his men were in the vicinity of what is now the City of Mexico, and that there, also, was the seat of Montezuma, and the other Aztec emperors.

"One day I walked up the roadway leading to the gardens of the Castle of Chepultepec, which is on top of the Rock of Chepultepec, the president's official residence. I noted that the road had been built up high, evidently to conceal something. Then I remembered that I had heard stories that beneath the roadway workmen had at one time came upon an artificial stone facing, and accidentally breaking through it, discovered behind it a cave or passage in the rock.

"This was hastily repaired and the road built up again, but not before the workmen discovered that within there was a great spring, the waters of which were carried away in drains evidently of very ancient make.

"In the Figuero document I had found references to Montezuma's bath. I wondered if this could have anything to do with the spring the workmen had found, and if the drains had been constructed to carry away the water so that it would not fill the caves, which were then walled up and the road built up to conceal them.

"I examined the road, and discovered that it was not at all similar to the roads built by the Spaniards, but resembled those of which I had read accounts in Guatamala, where great quantities of the relics of Toltec and Aztec civilization have been found.

"This convinced me that I was on the right track, but it would, of course, be impossible for me to tear down the road to prove my idea. I noticed that I was permitted to go into the gardens and wander around the roads on the rock at will, but I also discovered that I was being spied upon. Of course, the officers of the government knew that I was working on the clue given by the papers my uncle had left, and they evidently thought that I had found something of value.

"The Mexican secret service is very shrewd and far reaching. I had the papers that told of the treasure, they had the patience to let me search for and find it, then the power to take it away from me. But search as I would I could find no entrance to the caves beneath the rock, and for all I knew the castle itself.

"One evening I returned to the house of my aunt, and found her in a state of fear, almost bordering on

collapse. I was told that during the day the house had been entered by government officers and thoroughly searched. These men had even torn out the wainscoting in my uncle's library, and committed other outrages. But they did not get the papers, because I had them in my pocket that day."

"That was a dangerous thing," said Ted.

"But it was quite as dangerous to leave them in the house. I didn't know what to do with them. I had to refer to them constantly during my search. Then I thought of another way to keep them, and at the same time fool the authorities. I made a copy in miniature, using a cipher of my own, and concealed it between the two halves of the outer case of my watch. I gave the original papers to my aunt, who sewed them in the lining of her garments.

"But I wanted to fool the secret service men. I imitated the original letter and map on parchment, smoking it thoroughly to give it the appearance of age, but instead of copying the original matter I located the treasure in another rock far to the south, and made it appear so plausible that I had been deceived myself in the location.

"One evening I put these in my pocket and went to a hotel much patronized by Mexican government officials and spies. It created some surprise when I walked into the palm garden and took a seat. The members of the secret service who were there—and I recognized several—began to whisper to one another.

"You remember Torreon, the engineer who tried to steal my San Saba plans, and whom you rescued from the ditch into which I threw him. Well, he was there, as was also Captain Tosta.

"I saw one of the secret service men talking earnestly with Torreon. Some time later Torreon came to me, having apparently just realized that I was there. He professed friendship for me, and asked that I let bygones be bygones, and I apparently acceded, and we shook hands. Of course, I knew that he was up to some trick, and that was to get the papers which stuck out of the side pocket of my coat so that any one could see them. The band was playing, and we could hardly hear one another. Torreon suggested that we go to the other end of the garden and get a bench where conversation would be easier.

"As we walked away I saw Captain Tosta watching me anxiously, and I gave him the wink to let him know that I felt perfectly safe. There was something about Captain Tosta that I liked, and he had been at my uncle's house on several occasions.

"I hadn't been talking to Torreon long when I noticed that he had taken the papers from my pocket. At first I pretended not to know of my loss, and said nothing, as secret service men were walking past us and through other parts of the garden, but at last conversation lagged, and I arose to go.

"Suddenly I clapped my hand to my pocket, and pretended to miss the papers for the first time. I looked at Torreon, who had turned pale—I suppose he was thinking of the San Saba ditch—and started to back away. But I stepped in front of him, and said: 'Give me those papers you stole from me, you thief!'

"He backed away from me with a snarl. 'You're not in the United States now,' he said. 'Come a step nearer and you'll be sorry.'

"I was not afraid of him, and I only wanted to frighten him in order to make both him and the secret service fellows believe that I had lost the real papers. It would have been fatal to my plan if I had exhibited no concern over their loss. As I approached him I caught the flash of a knife in the lamplight, but before the blade reached me his arm was clutched and he was flung aside. At the same moment almost I was caught by the arm and hurried from the hotel, as the secret service chaps came running up.

"The man who had taken me out was Captain Tosta. When we were outside he whispered to me: 'Jump into this carriage, and hurry home.' He gave some instructions to the driver, who whipped up just as Lieutenant Losteros, accompanied by two of his men, came out of the hotel looking for me.

"I did not go to the Rock of Chepultepec for several days. I was making other preparations. My aunt and I were busy constructing a suit of livery similar to that worn by the president's servants. When it was done I disposed, in pockets made for the purpose, food, candles, matches, and my surveying instruments taken apart. I disguised myself, and was ready for the most hazardous adventure I ever undertook.

"In the early evening I went to the palace, and managed to get into the lower apartments without attracting attention. I was seen by other servants, but there were so many about the palace that a new face attracted no comment.

"I had no difficulty in hiding in the spacious cellar that underlaid the place, and about midnight crawled forth. Above me I knew that an official ball was in progress, for I could hear the strains of an orchestra and the slip of the dancers' feet.

"From the plans I had I knew there was an unknown entrance to the region beneath the palace, if only I could find it. Except for myself, the cellar was deserted, and I searched the floor and walls carefully.

"At last I was rewarded by finding what I supposed at first was an old well that had been walled over. In the floor, which was the bed rock on which the castle was built, I found, beneath a layer of dust, broken masonry. With an iron bar I began to pry this up, and found that it was easily removed. Evidently this was a part of the cellar into which no one came, for I was not disturbed, and heard no one.

"At last, after several hours' work, I felt my iron bar go through, and knew that I had penetrated into the unknown regions in the interior of the Rock of Chepultepec, and that the letter written by the priest and his map were correct.

"But I had to be very cautious. I tied a string, which I had brought with me, to the candle, and lowered it carefully into the hole I had uncovered. Then I discovered that I had come upon a spiral staircase cut in the rock.

"You may be sure I lost no time in descending, and after going down about thirty feet I came into a passage about six feet wide and ten feet high cut out of the solid rock.

"I followed this to another passage, and that to a square chamber, which I found fortified. All through the night I followed these passages, and about six o'clock in the morning I extinguished my candle and laid down to rest.

"When I awoke I continued my search, making a map as I went along. I was in there three days, laying out the passages and chambers as if I were platting a piece

of land above, and on the evening of the third day I came into the treasure-house. For a few moments I was stunned, then, picking up the emerald chain which lay at my feet I backed out.

"I had discovered the treasure of Montezuma. That was enough for the present, and the vastness of it, even superficially as I had examined it, simply paralyzed the imagination.

"I retraced my steps, and timed my departure from the palace so that I was not observed, and made my way to my aunt's house.

"The day afterward I received a note brought to the house by the peon who served us with fish. It was written on a cigarette-paper, and concealed in the mouth of a fish.

"It was from Captain Tosta, and bade me fly from Mexico that night, as the house was to be raided and I was to be killed. I made all my preparations, and as the secret service men were breaking into the front door I was flying over the housetops, and managed to get out of the country with my maps and diagrams, which I completed here. Now you know all about it."

"Except the part I am supposed to play in your future operations," said Ted quietly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN ON THE ROOF.

"I want you to get your boys together, and proceed to the City of Mexico," said Don Dorrington.

"Where are you going to be, and what are we to do when we get there?" asked Ted.

"I cannot go with you," replied Don. "But you will live in my aunt's house while you are there. She will precede you by a few days, accompanied by my cousin, Señorita Asturias. I will meet you there later. I dare not return to Mexico openly. I would be thrown into a Mexican prison at the border, and my friends would see me no more."

"What shall we do when we get there, that's what I want to know?" persisted Ted. "We can get there, all right; I have no fear of that."

"I will give you the plans and a copy of the letter, so that you will carry the documents. You see, my plans might slip up, and if I should happen to be caught and I had the papers with me our dream of ever getting the treasure would end in moonshine."

"So far so good. I carry the papers to Mexico, go to your aunt's house, then make a raid on the Castle of Chepultepec, capture it, load the treasure into automobiles, and——"

"This is no joke, young fellow——"

"I know it isn't. That's why I want you to tell me just what is expected of me. I do not propose to go into Mexico with a brass band and banners telling all about myself. I've been there before."

"I don't want you to do that. My aunt and her niece will start in a day or two. The family mansion stands in Tecuba Street. Go there one at a time at night, for it is likely that you will be watched if any of these spies now in St. Louis find out that you are going to Mexico."

"That's true. If Señora Figuero knows that we are going to arrive separately, and who we are when we get there, there will be no difficulty. We should decide upon a countersign to prevent mistakes, or at least have some one whom we can all trust meet us when we arrive."

"I will arrange all that. Get your boys together, and get them to the City of Mexico without detection or detention, and they will be cared for there. After that we will plan the best way to get the treasure."

"By the way, there is a member of our organization whom you have not met. It is a girl, and Stella Fosdick is her name. She has been with us on most of our adventures, and if she were not in this there would be trouble for me."

"Have her come, by all means. What's the matter with having her go with my aunt and cousin. She could await your arrival with them."

"All right. She is in the city, and to-morrow I shall call on her, and tell her to prepare to go to Mexico. When shall I have the boys come?"

"My aunt is prepared to leave here at once. The sooner we get to work the better."

The following morning Ted telegraphed to Bud Morgan at the Moon Valley Ranch telling him to bring all the boys who cared to join the Mexican expedition, but to be sure to leave one or two behind to superintend things on the ranch until they returned.

Before night Ted received a reply from Bud to the effect that Ben, Kit, Carl, and Clay Whipple would accompany him to St. Louis, leaving South Dakota the next day.

Ted then called up the residence of Mrs. Warburton, in Westmoreland Place, on the telephone, and asked if Miss Fosdick was at home.

"Who is this talking?" a voice asked. Evidently it was a servant who had replied to his call.

"If she asks, tell her it is a deputy sheriff," answered Ted.

"Oh, mercy!" he heard the person at the other end of the line exclaim.

Then another voice close to the telephone asked:

"What is it, Mary?"

"It's a policeman, er sheriff, er somethin' loike that as wants to talk to Miss Stella," Ted heard Mary reply, and he smiled.

"The impudence of him," Ted heard Mrs. Warburton say. She was Mrs. Graham's sister. Mrs. Warburton was a decidedly fashionable person, and evidently the thought of a deputy sheriff calling her niece up on the phone was distressing.

"Some one at the telephone wants to talk to me? A deputy sheriff, eh? Let me talk to him." Ted grinned, for he recognized the fresh, clear voice of Stella.

"Hello, you old scamp," came Stella's voice. "Oh, I know it's you, Ted Strong. How long have you been in town?"

"Hello, Stella, how are you? I've been in St. Louis since yesterday morning. If you are going to be home for awhile I'm coming out to see you—that is, if they'll let a cow-puncher and a deputy sheriff and deputy marshal in."

"Of course we will. Why didn't you tell your name? But it's all right. They'll let you in if you'll behave yourself, and not try to shoot down the chandeliers."

Ted heard several feminine voices, and then "Good-by."

When, later on, Ted told Stella about Don Dorrington's treasure-trove in the Mexican capital, and of his proposal that the young rough riders go there and help him secure it, Stella grew very much excited.

"If I don't go with you you'll never hear the last of it, Ted Strong," said Stella.

"Well, if your aunts will let you go it will be more than agreeable to me and all the boys," said Ted. "Let us talk it over with them."

Mrs. Graham and Mrs. Warburton came in soon afterward, and Ted told them about the projected trip, and explained that Señora Figuero would chaperon Stella and take good care of her, and both the ladies promised to call on Don Dorrington's aunt the next day and talk the matter over with her, and meet Señorita Asturias.

This they did, and found Don's aunt so agreeable and nice that they readily consented to let Stella accompany her to Mexico City. But they did not meet the señorita, who, the señora explained, was in the city on a shopping-expedition.

After making his call on Stella, Ted found that he had business down-town. He went first to the office of the Mexican Central Railroad, and made arrangements for the tickets and Pullman sleeping-car berths, and was walking along Pine Street when he almost ran into the Mexican he had chased from Dorrington's house, the man whom Don had called Lieutenant Losteros, the chief of the Mexican secret service.

The recognition was mutual, and the Mexican sprang back as if he had been struck.

Ted's first thought was of the sapphire chain.

"Here, you," he exclaimed, springing toward Losteros.

He caught the Mexican by the lapel of the coat, but the latter pulled away from him with a frightened cry, rushed through the doorway of a large office building, and dashed down the hall.

Ted's first impulse was to let him go, but the thought of the precious chain changed his line of action. With a whoop he took after the fleeing Losteros.

Just as Losteros reached the elevator shaft a car happened to be going up, and the operator was nervously clicking the catch on the door as a summons to hurry.

Losteros needed no urging, but sprang into the car, and it shot up, just as the door slammed in Ted's face.

There was no use in taking another car, although one was leaving the floor, for he could not know where Losteros might get off and take another car down.

He waited, therefore, until the car returned from the top floor.

"Why didn't you wait for me?" asked Ted, when the operator opened the door of the car.

"Time for me to go up," answered the lad. "Sorry, but I couldn't wait for the owner of the building. You must have wanted to see that dago a whole lot."

"I did, for he's a thief," answered Ted, who was somewhat ruffled, at the same time showing the boy his star as a United States marshal. "I wanted to see him very much, and also feel him within my grasp."

"Gee!" said the lad regretfully. "If I'd known that I'd stopped a week, even if I did get fired."

"Oh, well, never mind, you didn't know," said Ted, in a voice and manner that made the boy his friend for life. "But you can help me yet. At what floor did he get off?"

"He went clear to the top, and then I saw him duck toward the stairs that lead to the roof. You see, we have lots of visitors who go up there to get a look over the city, and as I didn't think you were after him, but only in a hurry to go up, I didn't think anything strange of it."

"Thanks, I'll go the same way, and see if I can't find him yet."

"Well, there's one thing sure, he can't get down unless he jumps off the roof with a parachute, for this is the only car that goes to the top floor."

"First-rate; Then I'll get a chance at him yet, unless he walks down to another floor and takes the elevator."

"He can't do that, for there is no stairway from the top floor to the one below."

"Then I have him sure!"

"I hope you have. Shall I wait for you?" The elevator had arrived at the top during this conversation, and the operator was standing with his hand on the lever.

"No, I'll catch you on the next trip."

Ted walked rapidly to the stairway, and ascended to the roof. At the head of the stairs was a door, which was closed, and when he put his hand on the knob he could not open it.

"That's strange," thought Ted. "It doesn't lock on the other side, that's a cinch, for here's the bolt on this side. By Jove, I believe the greaser is holding it. He's a brave chief for a secret service bureau."

Ted threw all his weight against the door, and it opened slowly at first, and then went out with a crash. Ted sprang upon the roof, prepared to grapple with the Mexican, but he was not there.

The roof was deserted, apparently, for there were no sightseers, and Losteros had evidently descended. But if he had gone down again how had the stick, which had held the door against Ted for a time, come there?

Losteros must be on the roof somewhere, and Ted started to make a systematic search for him.

The roof was large, covering almost a quarter of the whole block. Rising above it were several chimneys, behind any of which the wily Mexican might be hiding. Ted resolved to examine all of them.

Before starting on his search he picked up the stick with which the door had been fastened against him, for he had left his revolver in his room at Dorrington's flat. The stick was about three feet long and of good weight, and made a formidable weapon.

Besides the chimneys there were several projections of the cornice to fit the inequalities in the fronts of the buildings, as well as a tower on one side.

Ted did not know, of course, whether or not Losteros was armed, but decided that probably he did not have a revolver, as the law in the city against carrying concealed weapons was very rigidly enforced at that time, which had caused Ted to leave his own weapon behind. But he felt sure that the Mexican had a knife in one of his pockets, and, being what he was, would know well how to use it. This, therefore, was all he had to fear, and he felt confidence in his stick.

The first chimney, which Ted rounded rapidly, yielded nothing, nor did several others. He had stopped to look around when he saw a shadow moving near the cornice on the opposite side of the roof. It was the shadow of a man, and it was going rapidly in the direction of the door that led to the stairs.

It was less than half the distance from the door than Ted was. Of course, it was the shadow of Losteros, and Ted ran swiftly toward the door to head him off, for if he gained the door first he could easily lock Ted out on the roof, and it would be a question whether or not the elevator boy would remember that he had not gone down, and he would spend the night under the stars.

There was no doubt that Losteros had the best of the race so far.

Ted put plenty of sprint into his running, for he did not propose to lose the game when it was so nearly won.

Losteros, who was running wildly, was only a few feet from the door when he looked at Ted, and laughed and made a mocking face, at the same time waving his hand derisively.

If he had not done that all might have been well with him, for perhaps the idea would not have occurred to Ted to do some shooting, even if he had no revolver, but with the stick for a projectile and his unerring hand for a projector.

Losteros had no more unburdened himself of his decision than the stick left Ted's hand and described a parabola through the air, slightly in advance of him.

As a matter of fact, the Mexican ran into the stick, instead of the stick reaching him in its flight.

It struck him on the breast, and he pitched forward, and began to roll over and over, like a jack-rabbit that is stopped in its flight by a well-directed load of shot.

He brought up against the door with a grunt, and so severe was the shock that for a moment or two he was knocked breathless, enabling Ted to reach his side before he could rise.

Instantly Ted had him by the collar and jerked him to his feet. The Mexican struggled fiercely to free himself, and although he was sinewy and accustomed to fighting men of his own race he was no fit match for this young American athlete, who soon had him shaken into submission, even while he was taking away his knife.

"Now," said Ted, when he had got his man somewhat quieted, "fork over that sapphire chain."

"But, señor, I have no got de chain," replied Losteros. "To what chain does the señor refer? The señor is a stranger to me."

"Then you're not a stranger to me, Señor Losteros," said Ted grimly. "Mind you, I don't care if you were fifty secret service chiefs, you are a thief, and stole a chain, and I want it. If you are an officer of Mexico, I am an officer of this country, and—well, I happen to be in my own country, not in yours."

"But, señor, I protest, I have no chain. Let the señor search me, if he does not believe me. I ask the courtesy of one brave officer of another."

"What I want is the chain, and I want it *muy pronto*."

"I swear I have not the chain, señor." But his eye wandered toward the corner of the roof from which he had fled, and Ted's glance followed the man's gaze.

CHAPTER V.

SENOR ESCAMILLO MAKES A FIND.

Ted had seen a telltale fear in the wicked little black eyes of the Mexican.

They told him as well as word of mouth could that Losteros had disposed of the chain in that corner, and he could not control the motion of his eyes in that direction to see if it could possibly be in sight.

"All right," said Ted exultantly, "come on. You are a smart one for a secret service man. Why didn't you tell me in the first place what you had done with the chain. We'll take a look for it, if you please."

"But I know nothing of any chain," said Losteros. "Señor, you will soon see that I have not if you will search me."

"I will search your hiding-place first," said Ted, dragging the unwilling Mexican after him toward the corner.

Ted could find nothing in the corner that resembled the sapphire chain, although there was a crumpled piece of torn paper lying close by. He picked this up. It was a scrap of a newspaper published in the City of Mexico, and as he stood looking at it Losteros snatched it from his hand and threw it down, stamping on it, swearing volubly, his face purple with rage.

Ted was compelled to laugh at the foolish anger of the Mexican.

"So this has betrayed you, after your eyes told me where to look, eh, señor of the mighty secret service?" said Ted.

"Bah, it is nothing! What can you prove by that?" snarled Losteros.

"Only that you had the sapphire chain wrapped in this paper, and that you made way with it. But I shall find out what you did with it yet. I shall not only search you, but every inch of this roof, and the building under it, and the earth beneath that. Do you hear that? When I fail, there, if I do, I shall have every Mexican in this city brought before the police, and not only themselves, but their lodgings searched. I am determined to find that chain. In the meantime, I shall turn you over to the police for safety."

"I defy you. You cannot do so. Do you think I know nothing of police methods?"

"Not as much as you will later on."

"Ah-h, señor, I s'all have the r-revenge for this insoolt," came from between the Mexican's grinding teeth.

"Any old time you can, Losteros. But first you might as well help me to find that sapphire chain. It will make things a little easier for you, that's all."

"For the last time, no, no, no. Nevair s'all I confess to a gringo such a things. I defy you! I hate you! I kill you in my thoughts."

"If you never do anything worse than that, all right. Hello, what's this?"

Ted was looking at the mouth of a drain-pipe a few feet away.

The pipe was in the roof, about six inches in diameter, and was covered with an iron cap, the top of which was pierced with small holes to let the water through, but keep débris out.

Ted's first thought on seeing it was that the Mexican had concealed the chain within the pipe, but obviously the chain was too large to pass through any of the holes in the cap.

He was about to cast aside his belief that the pipe had been the receptacle for the chain, when he happened to glance at Losteros.

The Mexican's face was livid with fear and anxiety.

"Ah, then you did hide the chain in the pipe?" said Ted, with a grim smile.

He stooped to examine the cap more closely, when he received a tremendous blow on the jaw. For a moment he felt sick, and colored lights flashed before his eyes.

He heard a laugh, and felt a hand fumbling in his pockets.

The Mexican was trying to recover his knife, and Ted knew what would happen to him if his efforts proved successful.

He pulled himself together, rose on one knee, and, summoning all his strength, grappled with the Mexican.

Fortunately his fingers found the throat of his enemy, and then began a struggle for his life, for the Mexican had murder in his heart, and for the time he had the advantage.

As they struggled they were unconsciously rolling toward the rear of the building, where there was no cornice or other rise or hindrance to prevent them from falling off, to drop eight stories to the alley pavement.

Ted saw the danger out of the corner of his eye, as, for a moment, he was able to raise his head.

As Bud often said: "Ted, when it comes ter ther end, an' he cain't go no furder, allays manages ter scrape up jist enough extry steam ter win out." And this is what he did when he saw the awful death that waited them both.

This is where he found his "extry steam," for he stopped rolling just where he happened to be, and put additional pressure on the Mexican's throat.

There was a faint struggle, and Losteros' tongue began to protrude. He had been conquered, and after a shudder he relaxed and lay still.

Ted arose and dragged his enemy from the edge of the roof, and breathed a sigh as he realized the narrowness of their escape.

Leaving Losteros where he lay, Ted went to the drain-pipe and lifted the cap. He saw immediately by the way the dust had been disturbed around it that it had been lifted only a short time before.

There was now no doubt in his mind that Losteros had placed the sapphire chain in the pipe, but it was nowhere to be seen.

"The question to be solved now is how long that pipe is, and where it ends," said Ted to himself. "It's a cinch that if the chain got started down, its shape and weight would carry it to the bottom—wherever that is."

As he stood meditating upon it, the Mexican recovered, and looked up to see Ted with the cap of the drain in his hand.

An exclamation of baffled rage escaped him, and he tried to rise to his feet.

"Better stay where you are if you know when you are well off, Losteros," Ted said quietly. "You are a dirty coward, and you kicked me on the chin. I sha'n't handle you so easily the next time. I'll make a good job of it."

At this Losteros turned away and began to rub his throat, on which the prints of Ted's fingers still remained.

A sudden resolution was formed in Ted's mind as he watched the Mexican, and he proceeded to put it into execution. He walked to the door in the roof, stepped inside, and closed and bolted it.

He had hardly finished than there was a rush of feet on the other side, and the voice of Losteros raised in lamentation.

"Oh, señor, let me out!" it said. "I s'all die up here on a strange roof in this horrible city. Let me out, and I s'all do anything you say. I s'all go to the police with you. Let me out!"

But Ted left him begging, and rang the elevator bell.

"Well, did you get him?" asked the elevator boy, when he stopped the car at the top floor.

"Yes, but I'm going to let him stop up there for awhile to cool off," answered Ted.

"Oh, let me out, señor," came the wailing voice of the Mexican.

"There! Hear that? He's safe for awhile. When you get ready, say before you stop running to-night, you might go up and let him out. But don't forget it, as if he was to stay up there all night he might miss his supper."

"All right," said the elevator boy. "I'll let him out. if I don't forget it."

"Where does that drain-pipe on the northwest corner of the roof empty?" asked Ted.

"It makes a straight shoot from the roof to the ground, and the water pours out at the corner of the sidewalk and the alley around on Eighth Street."

"All right. Get me down to the street as fast as you can, and here's a dollar for you."

"She goes through without stopping," said the boy, and dropped the car to the bottom, regardless of signals to stop, with such swiftness that Ted seemed to be in the air all the time.

He stopped it, however, like a feather when he reached the bottom, and flung the door open, and Ted sped down the hallway, dodging people, and shot out the doorway.

"That young fellow certainly is in a hurry," commented the elevator boy. Then he felt the dollar in his pocket and said: "I think I'll forget the dago on the roof. I guess that is what he intended for me to do."

In the meantime, Ted had dashed to the corner with such speed that people stopped to look at him, wheeled around the corner, colliding with a fat man, who was sent pirouetting out of his way, and went to the corner of the alley.

There was the bottom of the drain-pipe, but the sapphire chain was not in sight. Had it stuck on the way down?

The bottom of the pipe was bent with an elbow, so as to throw the water away from the wall. This prevented Ted from looking up the pipe.

He had just managed to twist the elbow loose and lift the joint off, and had lain down on his back on the pavement to look up the pipe when he was stopped by a rough voice saying:

"Here, you, what are you doing, damaging the property of this building?"

He looked up at the janitor of the building, for so a sign on his cap proclaimed him.

"It's all right, friend," said Ted. "I'll fix it again in a minute."

"Come out of there," bawled the janitor, grabbing Ted by the heels and dragging him away from the pipe. But Ted had seen clear to the top of the pipe before being drawn away, and—it was empty.

But it made him angry to be so unceremoniously treated.

"See here, you chump, what do you mean by handling me like that?" he said, to the janitor, who, on seeing a well-dressed and athletic youth before him, began to back away.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I didn't know who it was, or I wouldn't have been in such a hurry."

"All right, but for that you'll put the elbow on yourself," said Ted. He had no time to quarrel with the janitor. What he wanted to do was to get away by himself so that he could think out the puzzle of what had

become of the sapphire chain. It had come through the pipe without question, and some one had picked it up.

Now it was up to him to discover the finder.

As he walked slowly up the street, after a long survey about, a man who stood within the shadow of a doorway on the opposite side of the way smiled after him.

"So, it was Ted Strong, eh?" he muttered to himself.

He retreated farther into the shadow of the doorway, and drew from the pocket of his white linen coat a beautiful chain of heavy gold links fastened together with splendid sapphires.

"Hey, did Ted Strong come to be hunting for that?" he continued, interrogating himself. "Señor Escamillo, you are a lucky dog, and Ted is a luckier fellow. I come wandering down the street looking for adventures, and as I pass an alley there is a rattle and a clatter above my head. I look up and see nothing. But the clatter continues and I stop, and suddenly there falls at my feet from a gutter a chain of gold and sapphires, if it is not one of brass and colored glass.

"I wonder which it is. If it is the real thing I have made a lucky strike, for there is only one place from which it could have come, and that is Mexico. We shall soon see."

A pawnbroker a few steps up the street was so astonished when he saw a foreigner, who might have been a Mexican, throw a chain upon his counter, that he let his glasses fall and almost broke them.

"Will the señor kindly look at the chain and put an estimate of the value upon it?" said the Mexican, stroking his black forked beard, and with a twinkle in his light eyes.

"Vere you got dis chain?" asked the pawnbroker, running it through his fingers, and speaking with assumed indifference.

The Mexican had been watching him closely out of his cold and shrewd light eyes, and had noted the look of greed on the pawnbroker's face.

"Eet iss an old heirloom in my family in the Spain," he replied.

"Eh, you are Spaniard? My friend, dis neffer come from Spain," said the pawnbroker suspiciously.

"How do you know, señor?"

"Because I am an expert mit jewelries. Dis chain is very oldt."

"That I know. All I want to know is its value."

The pawnbroker turned to his bench and put some acid on the gold links, and nodded his head with satisfaction. Then he applied a glass to his eye and examined the sapphires critically, one by one.

"I gif you zwei hoonderd dollar for it, cash money on sale. I no lend money on it because I cannot sell it. I vill haf to break it up und melt the gold." He threw it on the scale, and his eyes sparkled.

"Yes, I can gif you zwei hoonderd dollar," he said, with a generous smile.

"Couldn't you give me five thousand on it, and then double your money on the stones alone?" asked the Mexican, with a laugh.

"Vell, if you know so mooch about it, vhy you coom to me for information?" asked the pawnbroker. "You tell me vere you got it, und perhaps I chance five hoonderd on it."

But the Mexican had slipped the chain into his pocket again.

"You haven't told me yet what is the value of eet," he said.

The pawnbroker impatiently waved him away.

"Vhen you are broker as you are now come back, und I gif you zwei hoonderd. Now perhaps I gif you fife hoonderd."

The Mexican went out, with the pawnbroker beseeching him to return and leave the chain.

"Now I know that it is all right," said the Mexican, keeping his hand on the chain. "I'll keep it for you, Ted Strong, until you need it more than you do now."

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPIRAL OF MULBERRY PAPER.

Two days passed with Ted still hunting for the sapphire chain.

He had told Don Dorrington about his adventure, and that light-hearted young man had laughed.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Ted, if I were you," he said. "If Losteros slipped it down the drain-pipe he, at least, hasn't got it, and it is not likely that any of his confederates were at the bottom of the pipe to get it when it shot out. Some chap who doesn't know its value, or where it came from, probably picked it up, and Mexico will never see it again. If the fellow who found it is smart he will break it up and melt the gold."

"That's not the idea," said Ted. "I hate to be beaten by a greaser like that, and, besides, that chain was not only beautiful, but worth a whole lot."

"Never mind, there are plenty more where that came from, and even more beautiful and valuable," said Don. "You shall have all you want of them."

"I suppose you have heard the saying about the bird in the hand being worth two in the bush? Well, that's the way I feel about that chain. We had that, and the others are buried under Diaz's castle in Mexico. There's a lot of difference."

"Well, forget it for the time being; we may come across it some time. But to-day my aunt and Nina Asturias and Miss Fosdick start for Mexico, and I disappear, to turn up in Mexico one of the days, if—well, if all goes well."

"And to-night the boys get in. We will start for Mexico in a day or two."

"Before we part I want to give you these papers and the diagram of the treasure house. They will be safer with you. I will meet you in Mexico when you least expect it."

Ted took the papers and made them up into a neat package, which he placed in the inner pocket of his vest, and buttoned his coat over it.

The ladies were to leave on the two-o'clock train, and Ted went down-town to make final arrangements for their departure.

When he returned to the house he was met by Señora Figuero.

"Don has gone," she said. "He left a farewell for you, and said he couldn't wait to see you. He said you knew just what to do, and would do it. Stella will be here soon to drive to the station with us, and before she comes I wish to arrange with you how we are to take care of your companions when they come, for I understand that you are not going to travel together."

"What is the number of your house?" asked Ted.

"It is Tecuba Street, No. 418. You better take a carriage when you arrive in Mexico, and drive straight to the house. One of us will be on the lookout all the time so that we will be able to detect any attempt at deception. But in case it should be necessary for any of you to assume a disguise so that Stella could not recognize you through the lookout we shall have, it might be well to have a word by which you can be identified."

"That is a very good idea," said Ted. "What would you suggest?"

"Who comes to the door will be asked, 'Where do you come from?' He will reply, 'Moon Valley.' That is the name of your ranch, is it not? No one here will know it, and it is simple."

"That is all right. I haven't made up my mind yet how the boys shall travel. It will depend largely on whether we are closely watched by the Mexican spies or not, or what they may be able to find out about our movements."

"They cannot know much about you."

"I am afraid they do. You see, they have seen me leave this house several times. They stole the chain from here, and saw me follow Losteros, and that scoundrel knows me too well, after I choked him and left him to shiver through the night on a roof. Of course, they all know that I am connected in some manner with Don Dorrington, and as he is the discoverer of the treasure of Montezuma, as proved by the sapphire chain which they stole and then lost, they cannot but think that I am more or less mixed up in it. I know that every movement I make both inside and out of this house is watched."

"Oh, surely not in this house."

"No? Then watch."

Ted stepped softly to the door and threw it open. The Mexican servant in the slashed trousers stood bowing on the threshold.

"I was just about to knock to ask the señora when she would have the luncheon served," he said, without a tremor.

"At twelve o'clock," replied Señora Figuero, and with another low bow he departed.

"What do you think of that?" asked Ted, with a peculiar smile.

"How did you know he was there?" she asked. "Perhaps it was only a coincidence. He may have been just about to knock when you heard him, and opened the door. We were talking in such low tones that he could not have heard us, anyway."

"You doubt it! Look there!" Ted pointed to the ceiling.

Arranged above the transom was a mirror. In it could be seen the figure of the servant with his head bent, listening attentively.

Again Ted crept softly to the door and threw it open. The servant was bowing on the threshold as before.

"What is it, Pedro?" asked the señora calmly.

"Shall I serve coffee or chocolate with the luncheon?" said Pedro imperturbably.

"Chocolate," replied Señora Figuero, in the same smooth voice.

"Ted Strong, you are clever," said she, when the door closed on the servant. "Don has told me nothing about this."

"Don knew nothing about it," said Ted. "He has been so busy with his plans and schemes that he has thought of nothing else. I was convinced from the knowledge that the Mexicans outside had of our movements that some one inside was carrying news to them. At first I believed that your niece had something to do with it on account of her mysterious movements, and the irregularity of her habits, for I have never seen her and Don at the table or in the parlor together. She seems to avoid him for some reason or other.

"They are not on good terms," said Señora Figuero, flushing painfully.

"I beg your pardon," said Ted. "I had not thought to bring up anything embarrassing."

"It is of no consequence," said the lady, laughing heartily. "The señorita will laugh when I tell her of your suspicions."

"I hope you will not do that," said Ted. "I should not have told you."

"Very well, I will not. I will let you tell her yourself some day if you should ever wish to."

"But tell me how you came to discover that anything was wrong," said Señora Figuero.

"One day I was at work in here, and I saw his shadow reflected on the ceiling over the transom. I couldn't understand why he should be there and in such a peculiar attitude. He seemed to be crouching. I pretended not to notice the shadow, but walked across the room, and crept silently around, following the wall, until I reached the door, which I opened suddenly, as you saw me do a few moments ago. Pedro was crouching before the door, pretending to be sweeping dust into a pan with a brush. I saw then that his reflected shadow had been caused by the sun shining on the glass of the front door. Then I thought of the mirror, and put it up there. I have no doubt that Pedro has learned many secrets of this room through the keyhole, and that the successful spying of Losteros and his men has been due to his tips, and that was how we came to lose the sapphire chain."

"I was going to send Pedro to Mexico, and retain him in my service. I engaged him, you know, only a short time before I left there."

"In my opinion he is a member of the Mexican secret service, and only sought a position in your house to obtain information. Heaven only knows how much of our affairs the Mexican Government has learned through him."

"He must go at once. I shall call him in, and dismiss him immediately."

"You must not do that. Before he goes send him on some errand, and permit me to search his room. I may be able to find something that will throw the advantage back into our hands."

"Very well," said Señora Figuero, leaving the room.

Presently she returned. "I have sent Pedro on an errand which will occupy him an hour. I will show you his room," she said.

Pedro occupied a small room at the end of the hall, and, when Ted had seen the Mexican on his way, he entered it, and began a search. In the closet he found a modest wardrobe of clothes, and a small trunk, left ostentatiously unlocked. It contained nothing except a few worn clothes and some American trinkets, which he had evidently bought to take back to Mexico as curiosities. There were also a few letters, which Ted took the liberty of reading. They were evidently from a little daughter, begging her father to return home, and telling the small news of the home life of a man in moderate circumstances.

But as Ted read them he detected in them a false ring. They had been too carefully prepared.

"These letters were written by a man to be found and read by his enemies as an alibi," said Ted to himself, as he went through them. "A child would never have written such wise things as these."

He tossed them back into the trunk.

"That will not do, Pedro, to throw me off the track and sympathize with you. Somewhere you have more valuable papers," he thought.

But search as he would he could find nothing more, although he searched in every nook and cranny of the small room, even pulling the mattress to pieces.

The time given for the errand was nearly up, and he had found nothing incriminating, when a thought occurred to him, as he stood looking at the floor near the foot of the bed.

Near one of the legs of the bed was some fine white dust. It was only a small quantity, but enough for Ted to determine that it was sawdust left there in a hasty cleaning, for he could see that some of it had been brushed well into the warp and woof of the carpet.

Where had the dust come from? That was the thing to determine.

Ted lifted the leg of the bed and took out the roller. As he did so he saw something white protruding from the hole, and pulled gently on it. A long spiral of thin white paper, such as the Japanese make of the mulberry, and which can be rolled into an almost infinitesimal space, came forth.

"Ah, Señor Pedro, I think I have you now," muttered Ted. "This is what I have been looking for."

Ted hastily put the room in the exact condition he had found it in, except for the removal of the spiral of mulberry paper, and withdrew a moment before the hour which Pedro had been given in which to execute his commission was up.

Locking himself in Don's study, Ted carefully unwound the spiral of mulberry paper. It proved to be several communications addressed to Number 27, which were pasted one below the other. The whole thing could have been compressed so as to fit a walnut-shell.

The writing was in Spanish, and evidently had been originally written in invisible ink with a very fine pen, for there were evidences that the paper had been soaked in water, probably to bring out the color of the ink.

But while Ted knew Spanish perfectly he found that he could not make head or tail out of the writing before him.

It was so jumbled that it made no sense whatever, and read like the jibberings of an idiot.

After puzzling over it for some time Ted laughed softly to himself. "Of course," he murmured, "I might have known it. Cipher!"

Ted was well versed in the ordinary ciphers used in secret communications, for he had made a study of them while in the Philippines, where it became his duty often to intercept and translate the communications between native chiefs or officers of the insurgent army.

The Spaniards, whether in Mexico, South America, or in the Philippines, have always had great recourse to ciphers and secret alphabets, for the reason that their politics and warfare had always been so full of intrigue. In a library in Manila, Ted had once found an old book of ciphers, and mastered its contents, which he found very valuable to him when he was connected with the adjutant-general's department.

He sat for a long time poring over the mulberry paper. At last he lifted his head with an expression of satisfaction.

"Now I have it," he said. "It is written in Padre Politzo's cipher, used in Spain a century ago."

Then he began to translate the letters, writing down their substance in his note-book.

"Number 27," the first one began. "You are instructed by the captain-general to at once secure occupation in the house of the widow of Don Manuel Veldoza Figuero in any capacity obtainable. As you are aware, there are papers in that house bearing on a matter of the utmost importance to the government. You must secure these even at the risk of taking a life. Whenever you bring those papers to the headquarters in the palace I can assure you that the crimes of which you stand convicted toward the state will be forgiven. Work, then, with all expedition, as the time of your probation shortens with each day."

This communication was signed "Number 2."

The next one was brief, and was as follows:

"Admit to the house Number 18, and whomever he may bring with him. Aid him without being conspicuous in any manner. The day draws nearer."

This was signed by Number 2 also, and evidently referred to the time when Losteros entered the house of Señor Figuero and murdered him, for below it was a scathing rebuke for having assisted in the miscarriage of the plan and the murder, and including in it Number 18, who evidently was Losteros.

Then followed several relating to Pedro's accompanying the family to St. Louis, and absolute instructions for him to secure the papers and bring them to Mexico without delay.

Now there were several signed by Number 18, Losteros again, and these evidently were written in St. Louis, as they referred to the house in Newstead Avenue, and the fact that Don Dorrington was working on a diagram, of which a copy must be secured. There were others alluding to Ted's visit, and instructions to learn his business and his connection in what was called the "American conspiracy to rob Mexico."

The last few were answers to Pedro's letters, informing Number 18 of the approaching return of the family to Mexico.

"If you know where that chain is secure it at all hazards, as it will be most valuable in establishing with the president the truth of our assertions. If necessary, kill Dorrington."

This was the startling nature of another, after which was the following:

"We secured the chain, but were compelled to hide it, and it has fallen into the hands of Ted Strong. Make sure that he has it, then inform the bureau of his departure from the house by night, that he may be met by the dagger. Search the house again for it, as it must be there."

Ted had just finished the translation, and had slipped

the note-book into his inner pocket when he heard a slight noise behind him.

As he turned to ascertain the cause of it he was struck a terrific blow on the head, and sank to the floor, but not until he saw the leering face of Pedro, or Number 27, close to his own, before losing consciousness.

When he recovered, the welcome face of Stella was above his own.

"What has happened?" he asked, looking about and seeing Señora Figuero and Señorita Asturias standing near.

"We don't know," answered Stella. "We heard a crash in here, and found you on the floor with a bruise on your forehead, and your vest ripped open by a knife."

Ted sat up and ran his fingers into his pockets.

"Gone!" he cried. "The papers! All gone! Pedro! Find Pedro!"

To his astonishment he saw Señorita Asturias pick up her skirts in no dignified way and dash out of the room, while Señora Figuero burst into hysterical laughter.

CHAPTER VII.

ARE THESE YOUR PAPERS, SENOR?

Pedro had disappeared, and after searching the house Ted concluded that the Mexican, now that he had secured everything he wanted except the sapphire chain, would at once depart for Mexico.

He had the railroad stations watched, but there was no trace of Pedro, whose real name Ted did not know, nor the names of any of the other Mexicans who had been such a conspicuous part of Ted's short sojourn in St. Louis, except that of Losteros.

Shortly before two o'clock a carriage drew up before the house, and was entered by Señora Figuero, Señorita Asturias, and Stella, escorted by Ted. Even as they left the house a firm of packers began to prepare the furniture for storage against the time when Don Dorrington should return from Mexico.

The party drove at once to the Union Station, where the three ladies boarded the Pullman car to begin their long journey to Mexico.

Ted asked Stella how she liked Señorita Asturias, for to him she was the most unaccountable girl. She was graceful and courteous, but very reticent, and it was as much as Ted could do to make her talk to him at all, and it rather piqued him, for as a usual thing he had found girls rather partial to his society, and he was not at all conceited as to his attractions for the other sex.

"I think she is very charming," said Stella, with a puzzling laugh, which he failed to understand. "We are already good friends, and—she thinks you are fine."

"Stuff!" exclaimed Ted. "Why, she will hardly answer me when I speak to her."

"She'll get over that when you know her better," said Stella, and laughed again. At that moment Señorita Asturias looked at Stella, and a strange glance passed between them, which made Ted believe they had some secret between them concerning himself.

But before he had any chance to comment on it the train began to move out of the station, and Ted had only time for brief adieus when he was compelled to leave the car.

"Take care of yourself," called Stella out of the window to him, and over her shoulder he saw Señorita Asturias' face, on which was a peculiar smile, and Ted almost gasped as the Mexican girl actually winked at him and kissed the tips of her fingers in his direction.

Ted left the station in a very much disturbed frame of mind. Now he understood even less of the mysterious Mexican girl. What could she have meant by this last performance when, in saying good-by, she had not even shaken hands with him? Well, he would give it up. He never did understand any girl except Stella, anyhow.

He went to one of the leading hotels and engaged quarters for the boys, whom he expected to arrive that night, and returned to the station to catch a train on which to ride out a few miles and come back with the boys in order to tell them how matters stood, and to caution them to look out for the Mexicans.

As he was about to board the train he saw a man standing on the platform who looked very familiar, and yet he did not seem able to recognize him.

The man had a trim figure, was immaculately dressed, and had a short brown mustache.

Evidently the man was paying no attention to him, and the train moving out at that moment Ted lost sight of him. But when he had taken his seat he remembered immediately that the man whose face he knew and yet did not was none other than Darbey O'Neill, the government agent whom he had met in Dakota when he was engaged in breaking up the band of thieves and murderers known as "The Marauders," he whom the boys had called "The Man on the White Mule."

"By Jove, I wish I had recognized him sooner," said Ted to himself. "He is the very man who could have helped me on my hunt for the sapphire chain. He was about one of the cleverest fellows I ever met. He seemed to know everything."

He resolved to look up Darbey O'Neill that night, and then fell into a reverie in which he reviewed the events of the last few days, and speculated on the outcome of this apparently wild and dangerous expedition into Mexico.

This lasted until the train reached the station at which he was to board the one coming East.

He had not long to wait, and when the through train pulled in he boarded it and walked through to the sleeping-car.

As Ted entered the door he was greeted with the long yell, when the boys saw his familiar smile as he looked down the car. The passengers, many of them ladies from the East, who were unused to the playful ways of Western cow-punchers, were greatly alarmed and thought that the boys had found an enemy in Ted, and were going to attack him. The boys had been so quiet during the earlier part of the trip that when the break came they could not understand it.

When Bud let out a whoop and went galloping down the aisle toward Ted the ladies screamed, which was changed to the hysterical laughter of relief when they saw Bud grasp Ted by both hands and dance around him, and the other boys push him away to get to Ted's hand for a shake.

"Jumpin' sand-hills, but I'm glad to see yer ag'in," shouted Bud.

"Then it's not a lynching-party," tearfully remarked a little woman to one of the male passengers.

"No, from what I gather the young man who just came in is Ted Strong, who is called the King of the Wild

West, I believe on account of the brave deeds he has performed both as a cow-puncher, a soldier, and as a deputy United States marshal," was the reply.

"Oh, indeed, I have heard of him. He's quite young, is he not? I had supposed that Ted Strong was a great brute of a fellow who shot and killed men who disagreed with him."

"Now you see he's quite a different sort of a fellow," said the man. "We're proud of him out this way."

Meantime, Ted and the boys had retired to the drawing-room of the car, which the conductor had placed at their disposal when he learned Ted's identity. There Ted narrated the events of the past few days, going faithfully into all the details.

"Now, boys, I have given my word to Dorrington that we will go to Mexico and help him out, although I am not sure that we have the right to the treasure left by Montezuma when we find it."

"But we'll go," said Bud, with enthusiasm. "Squealin' squirrels, we've jest got ter go. Thar's a heap o' trouble down thar among them greasers thet I wouldn't miss fer a cooky."

"Well, we can start to-morrow, if you still say so," said Ted. "However, it is not going to be a picnic, even to get there, and we must decide upon some way of reaching there without the Mexican spies getting next to us. If we ride into town on this train with these khaki suits on we might as well go in with a banner on which is transcribed 'We are the young rough riders, and we're going to Mexico City to rob it of its treasure. You can't hold us.' Of course, there wouldn't be something doing in Mexico City for us when we got there."

"Well, what d'yer propose?" asked Bud.

"In the first place, we must get off at a point just this side of the Union Station, and find our way alone and by separate ways to the Southern Hotel. Then get in the elevator without approaching the desk, and go directly to rooms 223 and 225. Here are the keys. Once there, strip off these uniforms and get into ordinary citizens' clothes, which will be less conspicuous than these. Later in the evening we will decide just how we will get away from the city."

This appeared like a sensible plan to the boys, and they approved of it heartily, and when the train slowed down at Mayfield they quietly left the train.

There was no one on the platform, and the boys split up as if none knew the other, and each took either of the three trolley lines that carried passengers down-town. Thus they avoided several Mexicans who were hanging around the Union Station to meet them and spy upon their movements.

In about an hour they gathered in the rooms at the Southern Hotel, and soon had themselves transformed from dapper young men in a semimilitary uniform to a lot of bronzed young chaps out for a college football-game, and they carried this out in their behavior, so that there was no comment whatever on their appearance after they went down into the lobby and mingled with the other guests.

Jack Ryan, the head clerk of the Southern, a celebrated wit and practical joker, had all the newspaper reporters running about asking questions about the boys and receiving mysterious and reserved answers.

"Do you see that young fellow over there?" said Jack Ryan, in a mysterious voice, to one of the reporters, pointing to Ted. "That's the president of the Young Millionaires' Baseball-team. Every one of the players is the son of a multimillionaire, and a millionaire in his own right. They travel in fifteen-thousand-dollar touring-cars, with their valets and their own chef. They have taken the whole parlor floor for themselves and their guests. They play ball for fun, and any one of them would be eligible for a job on any of the big league teams."

Then the reporter would rush frantically after Ted, and ask him all about it, while Ted would listen patiently enough and then look mysterious, and say: "You'll hear all about it later, when the manager comes in."

Then Ryan would point out Ben to another reporter as young So and So, son of the Duke of Thingumbob, who had left his father's castle in England to become engineer on a ferry-boat on account of an unhappy love-affair with a royal princess. Then Ben would be cornered, and would look haughty and indignant, and stalk away.

And so it was with all the boys. Each had a remarkable newspaper story about him if he would only tell it, which, of course, he did not do. When Ted reproved the genial clerk with stretching the truth to a dangerous degree of tenuity Ryan would excuse himself by saying:

"It was all right. You see I wasn't lying, because I had my fingers crossed."

That night, before they went to bed, Ted gave to each of the boys a railroad ticket to the City of Mexico, with the injunction to take a carriage to the Figuero mansion in Tecuba Street and there give the countersign.

Each was to go in his own proper person or in any disguise he saw fit to assume or the circumstances seemed to warrant, but they were to be in the City of Mexico within a week.

"Mind you, boys," said Ted, "I don't want you to come to me and tell me what disguise you have adopted, because I don't want to know it, and I don't propose that you shall know mine if I can help it, and unless two of you are to travel together you are not to make yourselves known to one another except in times of trouble, and then any one who hears the shout 'Moon Valley' must go to aid him who utters it. I think these precautions necessary, for we will be watched closely by the Mexican Government however we go, and we must not fail to get to Mexico in time to help Don, for I am sure that he will be in a peck of trouble before he gets through with this enterprise."

The boys agreed to meet at breakfast the next morning and then go their ways, trusting to their own resources to get safely through.

During the evening Ted had made a search of the hotels for Darbey O'Neill, but could get no word of him, and concluded that he had been mistaken in his identification of the man he had seen in the station, after all.

As the train for Mexico was about to pull out of the station at two o'clock the next afternoon, a young and handsome man with blond hair and a small blond mustache, and with a monocle, or single eye-glass, screwed into his right eye, approached the conductor of the through Pullman car and languidly inquired if anything had been reserved for Rossminster. He spoke with a very pronounced English accent, and his clothes were even more pronouncedly English than the inflection of his voice, while a porter piled up about him an alarming

array of bags, shawls, umbrellas, and canes and other hand-baggage.

"Yes, sir, Lord Rossminster," replied the conductor. "Drawing-room through to Mexico City, sir. You'll have to hurry, sir. Time for the train to start."

"I never hurry," said his lordship, still more languidly, as the train conductor hurried up to ascertain the cause of the delay, while the negro porters were carrying the baggage aboard.

The car conductor whispered something to the train magnate, who lowered his hand and permitted the Englishman to crawl aboard.

Then the train departed, ten minutes late.

Lord Rossminster sauntered through the car to the drawing-room, and immediately drew the blinds and shut himself in, while a quiet young man, his valet, disposed of his effects, and made his lordship comfortable.

"By hokey, I'm going to take this darned mustache off," said Lord Rossminster, in a suspiciously American voice. "It tickles my nose. I don't suppose any one will butt in here and catch me with it off, do you, Kit?"

"Say, Ted, you carried it off bully," said his lordship's valet, who was none other than Kit Summers. "I swear, I didn't know it was you until you spoke in your own voice. When you told me this morning that there was a chance of my getting through all right in the capacity of an Englishman's servant I had no idea that the Englishman would be you. I have been worrying over the fact that I might have to punch his lordship's head before we got to the end of the journey if he got too fresh with me."

Ted Strong leaned back and laughed softly, as he thought of the servility of the conductors.

"We'll have to stay pretty close here, Kit, if we want to put off any part of our disguise and be comfortable. You better go out in the car now with the tickets and wait till the conductor comes along while I'm resting, you know. If I go out with this mustache on right now I'll be sure to scratch it off."

During the afternoon, Ted, having changed his suit for another quite as English as the one in which he made his first appearance, and with his head covered with a little plaid cap, sauntered out into the car to take stock of the passengers, and see if he could "spot" any suspicious persons, or see through the disguise of any of the boys, should they have taken the same train.

He passed a man who gave him a start, but he quickly recovered himself as he found himself looking at a young Mexican with light-colored eyes and a small black mustache.

Going into the smoke-room in the forward part of the car he sat down to think it over, and wonder if the Mexican had penetrated his disguise. The room was empty save for himself, and he was looking out of the window when he felt some one take a seat beside him. He wheeled, to look into the pale eyes of the Mexican.

"Are these your papers, señor?" asked the Mexican politely, handing Ted a package.

Ted took the packet from his hand, and ran the papers hastily through. They were the plans and diagrams, the spiral of mulberry paper, and his note-book.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE MARKED CARRIAGE.

"Great Scott, who are you, and where did you get these?" said Ted, almost in a whisper.

"Hus-h!" said the other. "Put them in your pocket, quick!"

The Mexican had pulled his cap over his eyes, and, with his head back against the cushions, appeared to be dozing, when two men entered the smoke-room and began to talk noisily as they lighted their cigars.

After waiting a moment or two Ted got up and walked out.

When he was gone one of the men winked at his companion and laughed.

"That's a howling swell," he said. "I asked the conductor about him, and he said he was Lord Rossminster, and that he was going to Mexico to invest in mines."

"There's something queer about him," said the other. "He don't look right to me."

"Oh, I guess he's the real thing. He has the drawing-room, and carries a valet."

The Mexican apparently woke up, and having yawned and stretched himself, lighted a cigarette, and sat in the corner languidly looking out of the window, while the other two talked on of unimportant things.

Ted had stalked haughtily through the car to the drawing-room, and when he had shut the door threw himself down on a seat and uttered an exclamation of surprise and relief.

"What's the matter, Ted?" asked Kit. "Anything happened out there?"

"Well, I should rather guess yes," said Ted positively.

"Well, let us have it."

"You remember how I was robbed of the diagram of the Montezuma treasure-house, and the spiral piece of paper with the cipher letters, and my note-book."

Kit nodded.

"Well, I went out through the car, and there sat a Mexican I had often seen in St. Louis. I was a bit surprised and put out, and went up to the smoking-compartment to think about it when he came and sat down beside me."

"That was something of a shocker. Do you think he penetrated your disguise?"

"Did he? Well, he handed me a package, and said gently, 'Are these your papers, señor?' Do you think that looks as if he recognized me?"

"A little bit. But how did you get back at him?"

"I asked him who he was, of course, and just then two big muffs came in, and my Mexican dropped asleep as naturally as you please, and after a decent interval I came here. I tell you, the complications of the last few days have got me dizzy."

"And you haven't an idea who he is?"

"Of course not, but there is one thing sure, he hasn't anything to do with that Losteros lot, or—by Jove, I wonder if this isn't a shrewd game of some sort to put me in bad when I reach Mexico. He has had all he wants out of these papers and gives them to me, expecting that I will carry them, and when we get safely into Mexico I will be searched, according to instructions which he will send ahead. I shall be thrust into prison on some trumped-up charge, and you know what a Mexican prison is. If they don't want to let your friends know where you are there you stay until you rot. No,

no, my smooth Mexican friend. I'll find a way to fool you yet."

Evening was coming on, and Ted sent Kit to the dining-car to order supper.

"Tell them that I want to have supper served in the drawing-room here," he said. "Tell the conductor to have a porter bring it back, and then you will come in, under a cracking big lie, for I am hungry. I didn't have time to get any lunch in St. Louis. I was in such a hurry digging up this disguise outfit. When it comes there will be enough for us both."

Kit hurried away to order the supper, and after some delay two negro waiters appeared with trays loaded down with a quantity of good things. Kit certainly had ordered enough, and some to spare.

As the waiters set the table Ted noticed a small piece of paper, clearly folded, lying on one of the plates.

He picked it up, and saw written on it in small regular letters, "For the U. S."

Slowly he opened it, and glanced at the contents.

The note said:

"Meet me on the rear platform as soon as it is dark. Do not be afraid. I am not what you think me. If you suspect that I am not all right, bring your revolver. I know that you can use it for I have seen you do it. Escamillo."

As Ted looked up he saw one of the waiters gazing at him with lifted eyebrows, which were interrogation points.

Ted nodded slightly, and the waiter disappeared from the room.

Kit reached out his hand for the note, which Ted gave him.

When he had read it Kit emitted a low whistle.

"The plot thickens," he said. "What do you suppose it means?"

"Search me. Seems to know me pretty well. I'm going," answered Ted.

"Better take your gun."

"I'll surely do that, but until I see him and hear what he has to say I'll sure do some lively guessing."

They ate their supper in silence, for both were hungry, and they had something to think about in the strange note sent to Ted by the Mexican, who, whether or not he was a spy, seemed to know a good deal about him.

When it grew dark, Ted slipped his revolver into his outside pocket, and went out on the back platform.

A figure clad in white was leaning over the railing looking into the darkness. Ted had made enough noise in closing the car door to have aroused the Mexican, but he did not turn around.

Ted touched him on the shoulder, and the man swung his head around.

It was Darbey O'Neill, the United States Government agent.

"Great guns!" exclaimed Ted. "You! Are you Escamillo?"

"The same, your lordship," said O'Neill, with a laugh.

"Well, you got me, but I wouldn't have known you in a blue moon," said Ted. "You have my head a-whirling."

"I am easier to disguise than you," said O'Neill. "You see, I have made a study of you, and then I have been watching you for several days, and, in a way, protecting you. You didn't know it, but I saved your ribs from feeling the sting of a knife one night. Your friend Losteros, against whom I have a grudge, was on your trail."

"Yes, I knew that. His man Pedro had orders to knife me."

"Poor Pedro!"

"Why poor Pedro? The scoundrel nearly brained me when he stole the papers from my pocket."

"Why poor Pedro? Because he got the knife intended for you. I really felt sorry for him because he was only the tool of Losteros, and one other scoundrel, both of whom I yet hope to put in a Mexican limbo. I was not far away at the time of his execution by Losteros and one of his professional assassins."

"I thought Pedro was a Mexican secret service man. How was it that they killed him."

"No. Pedro was the son of a wealthy man in Mexico, who got into the ranks of the insurgents against Diaz. He was betrayed to the government by Losteros, who at the same time kept him in hiding and finally got him out of the country to use him for his own purpose, with the threat of being taken back to Mexico to face the wrath of the high authorities always hanging over him. Of course, you know how it was worked, having deciphered the letters to him, in which you rendered me a great service, I can assure you, for, although I had seen the letters before, I confess I could not make head or tail of them."

"I do not see yet how you came by them."

"It is not necessary that you should know all now. I think you believe that I am your friend. I can be of much use to you, for you are going into a very hazardous game, with death always before you. But I have confidence in your nerve and judgment. Perhaps I am not doing the wisest thing in returning to you the papers stolen from you, but yet I think I am, for I cannot understand the diagrams which you carry, and I am too good a judge of human nature to ask you to tell me what you know about them. I simply trust that things will come as I am trying to shape them."

"But I should like to know where you got the papers."

"I will tell you that much. I followed Pedro, which, of course, is not his name, the day he left the house after knocking you down. All that afternoon I followed him. He was looking for Losteros to give him the papers, while Losteros, believing his tool had failed, was hunting him with the knife."

"Losteros is a wolf."

"He is not as human as a wolf. Well, as I was going to tell you, Losteros found Pedro at nightfall, and before the poor devil had a chance to say a word he fell with a knife between his shoulder-blades. As that happened I leaped forward with a cry, and Losteros ran away. It did not take more than a moment for me to search Pedro, and in his pocket I found the papers which I have returned to you. Then I, too, ran away, for I heard the police coming in answer to Pedro's death-cry. There you have the story.'

Ted was lost in thought for several minutes. He was still confused at the relation of this strangely omnipresent person, who knew so much and who picked up threads here and there and untangled mysteries in the simplest manner.

"I suppose there is no use in asking you how you are mixed in this affair, which seems getting more complicated every hour."

"Not the least. I cannot tell you. It would do you no good to know, and it might hurt us both."

"I am satisfied. I shall work along as best I can to help Don out of the scrape he seems to have got himself into."

"Well said. It is the only thing you can do now. But I shall not be able to communicate with you after this interview is over, and before we part I want to give you some advice, and, I may say, instructions for your guidance when you get to the City of Mexico—that is, if you trust me and still believe that I hope for your safety and best success."

"How could I help it?"

"I might be getting you tangled in a web, for all you know, but, as I have said, you are able to take care of yourself. However, when you arrive in the City of Mexico it will be night. Outside the station you will see a number of carriages. They all look more or less alike. You will, of course, be importuned to hire them all. But you will leave your man to take care of your baggage, and he will get into any of them and drive to the house of which you all know, give the countersign, and be admitted."

"Great Scott, how do you know about the house and the countersign?"

"It is my business. You will proceed along until you come to a carriage which has a red star painted on the rear glass of the lamp beside the driver's seat. The door of the carriage will be partly open, and the driver apparently asleep on the box."

"How do you know all this?"

"It has all been arranged for. To continue, you will enter the carriage, slam the door, and the driver will start."

"Where will he take me, and what must I do when I get there?"

"That will be determined by circumstances. You must follow your destiny after the carriage stops. That is as far as I can go. I suppose it will depend largely upon yourself what happens to you. But, as I said before, I believe you to be a young fellow of resource and courage, or I should not have noticed your career as I have done, nor have put myself out to aid you, as I have in a number of cases of which you know nothing. However, that is neither here nor there; if you desire to help your friend Dorrington you will follow my directions. But before you start for the carriage put on as modest a suit of clothes as you have, preferably your khaki uniform, and place a reliable revolver where you can get at it quickly. You can remove your wig and mustache, and make yourself Ted Strong once more after you are in the carriage. I can tell you no more."

"All right. I understand you perfectly. From what you say I am sure that action in the Dorrington case will begin for me the moment I set foot in the City of Mexico."

"That is as it should be. And now, *adios*. You will see me probably when you least expect to."

With a few deft movements Darbey O'Neill changed himself back into Escamillo, who passed as a cigar and opal smuggler in St. Louis, and a man of wealth among the hotels and clubs of the City of Mexico.

During the rest of the journey Ted stuck closely to the drawing-room of the Pullman. Kit made several trips through the train to ascertain if he could detect the presence of any of the other boys, but if they were there he did not penetrate their disguise, and no one hailed him as a comrade, although he was but lightly disguised as the valet of his lordship.

It was growing dark when the long train entered the station in the City of Mexico, and according to Ted's instructions Kit had arranged the baggage so that he could quickly move it and place it in a carriage and get away without notice, while Ted had got into his khaki uniform, and looked like a young British officer of the Colonial forces. The papers Escamillo had returned to him were safely stored in an inner pocket, and he felt the revolver on his hip beneath the skirt of his coat.

As he stepped from the train Ted looked about for Escamillo, but could not find him. But to his amazement he saw entering a splendidly caparisoned carriage with the coat of arms of Mexico emblazoned on the panel of the door the Mexican with the forked beard whom he had so often seen in St. Louis. He started forward to hail him, but was pushed back by a green-and-gold uniformed soldier, who leaped upon the box beside the driver, while two footmen sprang up behind, and the carriage rolled away.

"Well, I'll be darned!" exclaimed Ted, under his breath. "I wonder what is coming next. From the way the officials took off their hats to that fellow he must be some one of importance, and yet he was trailing me in St. Louis, I'm certain."

Suddenly he remembered his mission, and passed rapidly between the rows of bawling carriage-drivers, looking neither to the right nor left, until he espied, a few yards ahead, the carriage with the red star on the lamp.

The door was part way open and the driver was asleep on the box, as Escamillo said he would be, and Ted entered and slammed the door. Instantly the carriage rolled away swiftly, and Ted realized that some one else was sitting on the seat beside him. From the faint odor of violets and the unmistakable rustle of silk it was a woman, but whether young or old, ugly or beautiful, he could not know, for the interior of the carriage was absolutely dark, all the curtains having been drawn down.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WOMAN BEHIND THE MASK.

For several moments there was silence in the carriage, which finally was broken by a suppressed sob.

Ted felt himself blush in the darkness. This was more than he had bargained for. When O'Neill had told him to get into a carriage and accept what adventures fate would lead him to, he had no thought that there would be a woman in it.

He hardly knew what to do, but to him a woman's sobs meant that she was in trouble, and Ted was always ready to help a woman in distress.

"What is it?" he asked at last. "Are you in trouble?"

There was no reply, but the sobs ceased.

"Tell me, where are we going, and what is the meaning of my being in your carriage? Have I made a mistake?"

"Who are you?" came the startling reply, a question answering a question. "You have made a mistake."

"It cannot be," said Ted. "I was told to enter a carriage, of which the door was partly open and the driver asleep on the box, and, oh, yes, a red star on the carriage-lamp. This is the carriage, for all you say I am mistaken."

"But you are mistaken," [illegible] from which all the distress had vanished. "There is no star on the lamp of this carriage."

Before replying Ted pulled aside the curtain and looked out.

There was no red star on the lamp. The indy was right.

"This is a trick," he said sternly. "I have been [illegible]."

He was answered by a laugh.

"Who are you?" demanded Ted, determined to have this farce end before it was too late.

There was no answer to this question, but Ted heard a noise and an arm brushed his.

Reaching into his pocket he found a match and struck it.

It flared up, and he held it toward the corner in which his companion sat.

As he had supposed, it was a woman, but her face was covered with a half-mask, through which a pair of dark eyes looked at him inquiringly.

From appearances she was young, and presumably beautiful, for while she wore a *reboso* over her head it still revealed a mass of jetty hair, and before the light expired he had time to see that she had a bewitching smile, which disclosed perfect teeth, and a graceful figure.

"Am I so hideous or so terrible that I inspire fear in the breast of Ted Strong?" she asked, in the dark.

"You know me?" asked Ted, in surprise.

"Of course."

"Then why did you tell me that I had entered the wrong carriage if you expected me, as surely you must? And why did you tell me there was no red star on the lamp, when that was the mark by which I was told by Escam——"

"Hus-h! You are in Mexico. Do not mention that name or any other you know to-night."

"Then I am in the right carriage, am I not?"

"You are in the right carriage."

"Then tell me where we are going, and why we are going there. I am not to be trifled with, and it is my right to know."

"You are going to help Don Dorrington. Is that not what you came for?"

The voice, and it was the voice of a girl, had a rather contemptuous ring in it that stung Ted.

"Certainly I came to help Don Dorrington," he answered, a little sharply. "But I did not propose to go through all this comic-opera business in doing it."

"You are in Mexico, where such things prevail. They may [illegible] but all things cannot be regulated [illegible] Ted Strong wants them. The man who [illegible] is a sane and practical man. This [illegible] business, as you are pleased to call it, [illegible] did not appeal to him as such."

"You are right. I beg your pardon for my haste. As a Mexican, of course, you could not do otherwise than correct me. But I am in the habit of doing things straight from the shoulder."

"Our shoulders are not very broad down here in [illegible] so you see we are compelled to resort to [illegible]cy, or, as you would probably call it, stealth, to [illegible] our ends. And no matter how much one might wish to strike from the shoulder he would find that the fist would run up against the stiletto of diplomacy, after all, and where every one fights with the stiletto and wit, the shoulder and the fist are but clumsy weapons."

"I am rapidly learning." Ted laughed as he said it, and an answering laugh came from the other corner.

"Won't you tell me who you are, and lift your mask so that I may see your face? I do not like to fight without knowing who my comrade at arms, or I should say wit, is, for I suppose this is to be a battle of wits."

"You will learn soon enough who I am, and perhaps you will not care to see my face when it comes time to unmask."

This answer gave Ted a slight feeling of uneasiness, for it seemed like a threat, and as if he was to be put to some severe test. But he remembered what Darbey O'Neill had said to him about exercising his mind of re[illegible] and courage, and was cheerful again.

He laughed softly, and said:

"Oh, very well. It is a lady's privilege to withhold her name and her features from inspection. But whatever is to happen let it come soon and be over with. I came to Mexico to help Dorrington, and I want to get to the business."

"You will not have long to wait," was the reply, in a gentler voice than the masked woman had before used. "I am sure Don Dorrington appreciates your friendship and intentions, as well as your courage."

"You seem to know pretty well how Dorrington feels. Perhaps you can tell me where and how he is."

"Oh, he is well enough—so far."

"Then he is in danger."

"Not at the present moment."

"Is he in the City of Mexico?"

"Yes, he arrived several days ago, in disguise, and I believe as yet unsuspected. But if it should by any means become known to the authorities that he is here his life would not be worth a candle flicker."

"I see. But then, his friends——"

"That is the whole trouble. To a fellow in his shoes the greatest danger of exposure comes from his friends, who by some unconscious act or some kindly intention might easily betray him to the lynxes who do duty as spies here."

"But how am I going to help him if I do not see him?"

"You will be directed by various means, and when it is safe for him to reveal himself he will do so."

"Very well, again. I am ready for anything, but it is like this encounter, it is fighting in the dark."

"Which is the way we fight in Mexico."

The carriage, which had been bowling along at a smart pace, stopped suddenly, and Ted pulled the curtain aside an inch and looked out. It was very dark outside, but he saw a faint light a short distance away that flickered from a dirty lamp hung above the door of a dilapidated adobe hut.

He saw the driver hurry across the space between the carriage and the door of the hut. Ted tried to open the carriage door, but it stuck and he could not move it.

"It is locked from the inside," said the woman by his side, "and, see, here are steel curtains that lock, also."

She reached in front of him, pressed something that gave a click and a steel shutter shot up in front of him.

"To keep me from seeing out?" said Ted, with a laugh.

"No, to keep others from murdering those within," was the reply, and the steel shutter came down again with a rush, and Ted could see that the driver had been successful in getting some one to the door of the hut.

There appeared to be a hurried consultation, then the driver, looking toward the carriage, made a beckoning signal.

"All right," said the woman in the mask. There was a jingle of keys, the grating of a lock, and the door swung open.

Ted sprang out, and assisted the woman behind the mask to alight.

"Hurry into the house," she said, taking his arm and walking as fast as her high-heeled slippers would permit. "We may be seen. There are spies everywhere."

Before they had reached the door of the hut Ted heard the carriage roll away, then the door was flung open and closed quickly behind them.

Ted looked around, and at first could see nothing distinctly, having come from the densest blackness into a brilliant light.

There were several persons in the small room, and in a moment he could distinguish them.

"Hello, Ted," came the familiar voice of Stella. "Did you think you were being kidnaped?"

"Well, not exactly," replied Ted, "but for awhile I didn't know just what to think."

He looked about for the woman in the mask, but she had disappeared.

In a corner he saw Señora Figuero and crossed over to shake hands with her. The only other occupants of the room were an old Mexican and a crone of a woman, evidently his wife.

"Where are we now?" asked Ted, in English.

"We are in the inn kept by Pauncito and his wife, Madre Diabla," answered Señora Figuero. "Madre Diabla is a famous sorceress. Let her take your hand for a moment, but first cross it with a big piece of silver."

Ted held out his hand to the old woman who was standing by his side looking up into his face. He crossed his palm with a dollar, which he left in his hand. The old crone grasped the coin, and bent her head over the hand.

"You are a very brave and fortunate young señor," she croaked. "You are about to be led into great danger, but"—she paused several moments before going on—"the fates are battling for you, and if one thing happens you will come through safely."

"What is that thing?" asked Ted.

"I don't know. I cannot see it. But you have good fortune, courage, and good wishes on your side. These are very strong, but there are other things quite as strong against you."

There was a low knock on the door, and every one became silent.

Then the light was suddenly extinguished. A rustling noise followed, and the door was opened and a subdued argument took place. The door was closed and opened again, and the room was flooded with light once more.

Near the door stood Kit Summers, blinking like an owl in the afternoon.

"All right, Kit," said Ted, noting the expression on Kit's face, and the fact that his hand was on his revolver.

"It's you, Ted. All right, then. I couldn't see, and I was afraid of a trap," said Kit.

Bud, Ben, Carl, and Clay Whipple arrived and were admitted, and as each described his adventures there was much subdued laughter.

"Stingin' scorpions, but this hez been a busy night fer yours trooly," sighed Bud, when he had been persuaded by Ted not to begin shooting when he was first thrust into the room by the guide who had brought him there.

"What's happened?" asked Ted.

"I thought I'd be smart when I left St. Looey, so I gets a suit an' a wig an' a box o' grease-paint at a costoomers, an' fixes myself up ez a Chink-Chinyman, yer know. I tries ter git on ther sleepin'-car at St. Looey an' a brakeman snatched me off. I lets out at him, an' knocked him down. Then a bunch o' them comes fer me, an' ther conductor says: 'Let him be. A Chink what's got er fight in him is all right. Here, John,' he sez ter me, 'go up ter ther smoker, an' make yerself ter home.'

"I goes up ter ther smoker, an' is gittin' erlong all right an' mindin' my own business until we gits down into Noo Mexico, when a feller comes ter me an' says: 'Here, John, come along with me. I need a cook out at my place.' I wanted ter take a punch at him, but I wuz afraid I'd give myself erway, so I says: 'No savvy.'

"The train is stoppin' at the station, an' all ther fellers in ther car is laughin'. 'Thet's right, Bill, git ther Chinyman,' says one. 'This ain't ther fust time Bill's kidnaped a Chink.'

"I see I wuz up erginst it, an' all ther wuz ter do wuz ter make a holy bluff fer it, so I slips my gun out from under my blouse, an' puttin' it up under ther cowman's nose, I says: 'No savvy cookee. Me all same plize fighter. Skidee for you.' You orter seen him went."

This brought forth laughter, and when it subsided Bud went on:

"But thet wasn't all. When I lands at ther station here a feller rushes up ter me, an' grabs me by ther arm. 'Come with me,' he sez in Spanish. 'I am the immigration officer, and you hev got ter go inter quarantine fer two weeks before yer can be allowed ter roam eround.'

"I see I wuz up erginst it ergin, fer I didn't know the Spanish-Chink lingo, an' I dassen't use my straight Spanish on him. He wuz jest leadin' me off when a gent with a black beard shaped like a fork steps up an' sez: 'He's all right. He's my servant,' an' ther feller backs away with bows. 'Now,' says ther feller ter me, 'jump in thet carriage an' hustle ter ther house in Tecuba Street,' which I done, after I see him git inter a carriage what hez ther arms o' Mexico on ther door. I reckon he must hev been a wonder down here ter make a feller with gold braid all over him drop me like thet."

Bud had no more than finished his story than there came a loud rap at the door. The old innkeeper looked around in alarm. According to his orders all that were expected had arrived. While he hesitated about going to the door there was a crash and a cry:

"Open, in the name of the Republic of Mexico!"

"Officers!" exclaimed Ted.

At that moment the door flew from its hinges, and a squad of police, led by Losteros, sprang into the room.

"Jump them!" shouted Ted, drawing his revolver and springing at Losteros, bringing the butt of his weapon down on the head of his old enemy.

There was a wild cry behind him, and Ted heard a woman's voice shouting:

"Don't let them get away!"

Ted beheld Señorita Asturias rush past him and deal a policeman a blow that knocked him half way across the room.

In a few moments every policeman was on his back

with a young rough rider holding him down, and Señorita Asturias with her pistol at the head of the sergeant.

Then Ted knew that she had been the woman behind the mask.

CHAPTER X.

STELLA GETS LOST.

Losteros and his policemen had been defeated with ease.

They had come expecting to capture Don Dorrington only.

A member of the secret service had reported that he had traced the Señora Figuero, her niece, and a young American girl to the inn of old Pauncito, who was known to have been an ancient retainer of the Figuero family before he elected to become independent and started an inn for himself.

It had been known to the secret service that the women of the Figuero family had returned from the United States, and they believed that Don Dorrington would not be far behind.

Losteros himself had reached the City of Mexico only that morning, and when he heard that Señora Figuero had gone to the inn he determined to raid the place on the chance of catching Don there, for he argued that they would not go to such a place if it were not some such reason.

Had he expected to meet the King of the Wild West and his young rough riders he would have brought a considerable section of the Mexican Army, for he had not a little respect for the prowess of Ted Strong.

He was surprised then to find himself with his arms trussed behind him, and all his police in the same fix.

In this helpless condition all he could do was to swear under his breath at his luck.

Señorita Asturias, from being the Amazon Ted had beheld when she rushed to the aid of the boys, had become the graceful Mexican girl once more, although she laughed at Ted as she turned the captives over to him.

"I wonder what we better do with them?" asked Ted.

"I know," said the señorita, and whispered something in Ted's ear, which caused a look of wonder to spread over his face.

"The very thing!" he said.

Losteros and his men were huddled in a corner of the room, guarded by the boys with drawn revolvers.

"Blindfold those fellows with their own handkerchiefs," said Ted, and the order was promptly obeyed.

Led by Señorita Asturias, and with one of the boys to guide each of the prisoners, they all departed from the room through a door at the back, and found themselves in a passage that sloped downward.

The way was lighted by a torch in the hands of the señorita herself, and they followed it down on a steep incline for several hundred yards until it opened out into a small chamber which was guarded by an iron door.

The place looked as if it had been used in the past as a wine-cellar, for there were a number of empty casks standing about, and the close, musty smell of old wine made the air heavy.

The prisoners were thrust into this place, and the bandages removed from their eyes, and they were left protesting, cursing, and threatening.

Back went the party along the passage to another door.

"Now," said Señorita Asturias, "Ted Strong must take charge of the expedition until we can find Don Dorrington. This door leads into the back part of the yards of the Castle of Chepultepec. Here are several sacks containing food and candles. We will go through the yard to the cellar of the castle. I have bribed the guard, no matter how, to not see us. I will lead the way through the cellar to the place where we can enter into the passages beneath the castle. There we will hunt for the treasure-room, and get ready to empty it. But first we must search for the secret passage to the outside, so that we may not have to return this way. Don has told me that he is certain there must be some such passage, and it must be found. Follow me and Ted Strong, who is captain of the expedition."

She put out the torch, and instantly it was pitchy dark in the passage. Behind them they could hear the prisoners shouting like demons for their liberty.

A door clanged in front of them, and they stepped out into the fresh air with a soft wind blowing, and the stars overhead.

"This way," whispered Señorita Asturias, and they followed her silently. They crossed a big bare yard paved with stone, and above them towered the president's palace. From many windows lights blazed, making paths of light across the yard, and as they crept along in the shadows of the wall they could see a sentry pacing at the far end of it.

Soon they came to an opening in the wall and entered. They were now within the cellar of the castle, and, although it was intensely dark, the señorita led them unerringly.

"Stop! We are there. Now we must go down in darkness, and carefully, for a misstep would be disastrous. I will go first. Ted Strong will take my hand, and Stella his, and so along the line. I will tell you when it is safe to light the candles." In this manner they stopped at the opening in the floor that Don had made.

They were about to descend when Ted heard stealthy footsteps, and gave a low cry of warning. Whoever it was approaching was doing so cautiously. Evidently he did not know of their presence. Nearer and nearer he came until they could hear a jingle of his sword buckle, and his cautious breathing. Now he was close to Ted, who made a forward spring, and before his captive could cry out had a hand over his mouth.

"I have him," said Ted, in a whisper. "We'll have to take him with us. Lead the way before it is too late."

"All right, I have you by the sleeve. This way. Step down. Follow all." Señorita Asturias' whisper was businesslike, and in a moment they were all winding their way in the dark down the spiral stairway into the hell of Montezuma.

"This way," said the señorita. "Soon we can have lights."

On they went for a short distance, made a turn, and stopped.

A light flickered up. The señorita had lighted a candle.

"Let us take a look at our friend," said Ted, holding the candle up and taking his hand off the man's mouth.

"Captain Bolanco, by all that's mighty!" exclaimed the señorita.

"Yes, Captain Bolanco," said the officer, stepping back. "How do you happen to be here?"

"You will soon know," said Ted, "for you are going with us as our captive. You cannot escape. We shall decide your fate later. We did not want you, and it would have been better for you had you not found us."

The officer looked at the grim and determined face of the King of the Wild West, and then at the young rough riders and their drawn revolvers.

"So be it," he said resignedly, with a shrug of his shoulders.

With lighted candles their way was easier, and they were soon in the square chamber, which Don had platted on his diagram.

Ted took out his diagram now, and by its aid they soon set their course for the space marked treasure-house. As the Mexican captain looked around him and saw what he never believed existed, and then at the map, and realized that it had been discovered by gringos, he involuntarily gritted his teeth.

"You don't like to see us here, do you?" asked Ted.

"No, and by Heaven had I caught you sooner you would not be here."

"Do you suppose you can make the course?" asked Señorita Asturias to Ted, as he was poring over the diagram.

"Yes, it is perfectly plain, but without it we would be irretrievably lost," answered Ted.

"Well, I'm going out to find Don and bring him here," she said.

"Aren't you afraid to go out alone?" asked Ted. "You might get lost without the map."

"No, I have been here before, and, anyhow, Don knows the way," with which she winked at Stella, who began to giggle.

"When shall we expect to see you again?" asked Ted.

"The moment I return," and the Mexican girl started away down the passage, and soon the flicker of her candle was seen no more.

Ted had put two of the boys to guarding the captive captain, and as soon as he had fixed the way in his mind he led the way along the passages, with the aid of his compass, in a perfect labyrinth.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Stella, "if a fellow ever got lost in this place he never would get out."

"Don Dorrington might," said Ted. They were going along a passage when suddenly Stella stopped.

"Look there!" she cried, pointing to the skeleton of a man.

Lying against the wall of the passage were the bones of a man enclosed in the moldering uniform of a Mexican officer. At the sight of it Captain Bolanco groaned. He saw in it, probably, the forecast of his own fate.

"That chap got in here by accident, probably, and died like a rat in a hole, wandering around day by day until he gave up and died," said Ted. "Let us move on. It is not a pleasant sight for explorers."

For several hours they walked, stopping occasionally to rest in the numerous chambers through which they passed, speculating on the uses to which the Aztecs had put them.

The passages seemed interminable, and Ted did not wonder that it took Don three days of almost steady work to go through the place and plat it, and doubtless at that he had missed many of the passages and chambers.

Ted looked at his watch. It was one o'clock in the morning. They had been walking since nine o'clock the past evening, and he decided that it would be well for them to sleep. They found a convenient chamber, and Ted and Bud decided to keep the first watch over their prisoner, and for the general safety of the party. Stella lay down with Ted's coat for a pillow, and soon all except the guard slept.

At the end of four hours Ted woke Ben and Kit and asked them to stand guard, but to wake them in a couple of hours and they, too, got some much needed sleep.

By eight o'clock in the morning they were all awake, and had eaten breakfast.

"I wonder what is keeping Don and his cousin," said Ted. "They should have caught up with us by now."

"Perhaps they are waiting for morning before starting," said Ben.

"No, they would hardly do that, as it would be impossible for them to come in here by daylight," answered Ted. "I am worried about them, and if they do not come soon I am going back to try to find them. Even with Don's knowledge of the place he might have got lost. Nothing easier."

"Well, let us go on a little farther," said Stella. "I have been looking at the map, and from what it says we should not be far from the treasure-house, as Don calls it."

So they took up the line of march again, Ted and Stella in the lead.

Suddenly they turned a corner, and Stella fell back with a cry that had so much of wonder and joy in it that the other boys hurried to her side. Ted had gone on, and when the boys were gathered together their exclamations of amazement filled the vaulted chamber with a strange rumbling.

Stella had hurried after Ted, and Captain Bolanco, the only representative of Mexico there, followed in their wake.

About them lay piles of treasure, gold and silver in ingots and rude pieces that looked as if they had been dug solid from the mines; there were iron-bound chests piled on top of one another filled with gold and jewels where the Spanish conquerors had placed them, only to lose them again when Cortez was defeated; there were plates and shields of gold of barbaric workmanship, and urns and vessels of odd shape of the same precious metal, and scattered over the floor were heaps of gems, some of them rudely cut and set into armlets, chains, and other ornaments. And guarding all were the mummies of the past and gone Aztec emperors.

The untold wealth of Montezuma, the great Aztec emperor, and his predecessors, lay at their feet. It was so startlingly dazzling and stupendous as to be incredible. They could only look and gasp as they picked up and examined each new treasure. Over their shoulders, his fingers working like the talons of a bird of prey, and his face expressing a gamut of emotions from greed to fear and hatred, stood Captain Bolanco, through whose mind, if his face was any indication of his feelings, ran the dread that he would never see the daylight again.

But at last the glut of all this treasure began to pall upon them, and they turned away from it.

"I wish Don would come," said Ted. "We must make

some preparation for the removal of this stuff, or else leave it where it lies for the next explorer."

"Why don't you go back a ways and try to find him," said Stella. "Call to him. Fire your revolver. I'm going to rest awhile. The sight of so much richness has made me tired."

"I believe I will," said Ted. "Boys, you stay on guard, and take good care that Captain Bolanco does not escape." Putting an extra candle in his pocket Ted set out.

For awhile Stella sat quietly, then she got up and began to wander around, looking at the walls, but always in sight of the boys. But at last a pool of water down a passage lured her that way.

For several minutes she wandered around the pool admiring its beauty under the light. Evidently it was the pool known as Montezuma's bath. When she thought to return, for her candle was burning low, she looked up to locate the boys by the light from their candles, but she could not see them. She called loudly, but the only answer she got was the echo of her own voice.

"Lost! I believe I'm lost," she said aloud, in an awed voice.

"Lost! Lost!" came the answering echo through the chamber of the pool. But surely if she followed the edge of the water she would come back to the place from which she started, and would easily find her way back again.

She walked until she was sure she had circled the pool twice, but still she could not see the candles.

Then she found a passage and determined that it was the one by which she had reached the pool, and set out bravely along it. After she had walked several minutes she came to another chamber. But this one was oval in shape, and like none other through which they had passed.

Her candle was sputtering in its last sickly effort to give light, then, as with a gasp, it went out, leaving her in darkness.

Having been gone an hour or more Ted returned to the treasure-house, and reported that he could get no trace of Don or Señorita Asturias, and concluding that they would wait for night to come again before venturing in, he had come back.

"Where is Stella?" he asked.

"She went back there and laid down," said Ben. "I gave her my coat for a pillow."

They went to where Stella had been lying, but she was not there.

Ted stared down at the coat for a moment.

"When did you see her last, Ben?" he asked.

"About an hour ago," said Ben.

"Then she is lost," said Ted.

Raising his voice he shouted "Stella!" But the echoes called back to him "Stella!" in mocking tones.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN TOSTA AVERTS A MURDER.

This misfortune almost unnerved the King of the Wild West, for he realized to the full the extreme danger of being lost in this great tortuous tomb which wound back and forth, crossing itself many times.

But it must be faced bravely. He wished Don Dorrington was with him, for the young engineer knew the place thoroughly, and would know which way Stella would be most likely to wander.

As Dorrington was not there he determined to go himself without delay, and he would go alone, for it was useless to divide the party.

It would be better, in his opinion, to leave the boys where they were, so that when Dorrington arrived he would find some one on guard, and if Stella should wander into a passage leading to the treasure-house she would see their lights, and should he find her he would have a set place to which to go.

When he announced his intention he met with a general protest.

"Better take some of us with you, Ted," said Ben "This business of wandering around this ghostly place is enough to give a fellow the creeps."

"Sizzlin' sarpints, yes," said Bud. "Let me go. Every time I look into thet treasure-vault an' ketch sight o' one o' them king-pins I see ther feller grinnin' an' winkin' at me. I've got er dern good notion ter git lost myself, if only ter dodge them fellers sittin' in thar with thar knees drawed up ter ther chins, grinnin' an' showin' all ther teeth like a dog gnawin' a bone."

"They are a bit ghastly, I agree," said Ted, "but not nearly as terrible as getting lost in this horrible place. I wish we were out of it."

"Well, am I goin'?" asked Bud.

"No, I think you'd better stay here. You'll be safer, and there is no use in running more than two of us into danger at once. I have the map, and I can find my way all over with ease, and if Stella is still in the place, and no doubt she is, I'll find her—that's a cinch. Give me a few more candles out of that bag and some matches, and I'm off. When you hear a revolver-shot you'll know I've found her, and that we are on our way back."

"Supposin' Don Dorrington comes, what shall we tell him to do?" asked Bud.

"Tell him to come along and follow me, and try to find Stella. If one doesn't find her the other will. *Adios!*"

Ted was gone. Unconsciously he followed in the footsteps of Stella until he came to the oval chamber, and there on the floor he found the last eighth of an inch of her burned-out candle.

"She's been here," he said to himself, "and here is where she had her last glimpse of light. Poor girl, she's in a bad fix. But there's one thing about her," he continued proudly, "she's got more nerve than most boys."

There were three passages leading out of the oval chamber.

One of these started in the direction which Stella had been following.

Ted decided to take it, for he reasoned that she would naturally keep on in the way she had been going.

He did not calculate the chance of her becoming confused and turning around several times in her perplexity.

As he went he cried her name at close intervals, and several times he stopped, thinking that he heard her answer, but when he called again no sound reached him save the echo of his own voice.

He was following along a passage, and stopped just in time to save himself from falling over a precipice into an unknown depth, for when he lay flat on the floor, and, holding his candle down as far as he could reach, looked over the edge, he could see nothing except dense, velvety darkness below.

"Great Heaven," he cried. "If she has walked into one of these traps it is all over with her. These are not on the diagram. How easy it would be to walk into one. I can imagine it. The plunge into the dark, knowing nothing of the depth of the pit. Ugh! It is too horrible to think about."

He looked carefully at the diagram, but could find no passage that resembled this.

Then he turned back to its mouth, as he thought, but instead of going far enough he turned off again into a different passage.

He had not gone far when he heard the tinkling sound of water.

Then it began to get wet underfoot, and occasionally a drop of water fell on his head or upon his hand.

"Wonder where this comes from," he muttered. "Don makes no mention on his diagram of water from the roof, although he has noted the peculiarities of the other passages."

For the first time he began to doubt the accuracy of the diagram, but this had such a depressing effect that he cast it out, and took a more optimistic view of the situation.

Probably Don had been in this place, but the dampness of the walls and roof had not impressed him greatly.

As he went along he began to notice growing along the floor of the passage close to the wall, where the dampness was greatest, a beautiful little fungus. It was brilliantly scarlet in color, and, as the light from his candle fell upon it, it glowed like some brilliant and unearthly flower.

He had never seen anything like it before, and as he stooped to examine it he marveled at its rapid growth. He could actually see its slender stems coming out of the ground, scarcely bigger round that horse hairs at first; they grew larger as they became longer until they were as long and about as big around as lead-pencils.

While they were growing they writhed about as if they were feeling for something in a blind sort of way. The sight of their blind, hungry motions became rather sickening, and where they had been beautiful when very small they seemed uncanny in their larger growth.

He held the candle to one of them, and it shrank back from the flame as if it were a living creature. But when he forced it to the wall it darted forward and enveloped the candle like the tentacle of a devil-fish. This interested him, and he held his finger out to one with a teasing motion.

Instantly the fungus darted toward the finger, clutching it, and apparently trying to break through the skin. The pain was intense, somewhat akin to that produced by the nettle, Ted thought.

When he tried to withdraw his finger from its clutch it clung with the tenacity of a leech, which it much resembled in its action on the skin, except that it seemed to have no means of getting through the skin to the blood. The more he pulled the closer the fungus clung, until he was compelled to get out his knife and sever it, when it dropped from his finger.

He continued his way with a decided feeling of repugnance for the fungus which at first he had thought so very beautiful.

Here and there he saw the tiny fungus springing up at his approach, and he wondered if his presence had anything to do with its growth. Then came the horrible thought that perhaps this apparently innocent growth was nothing more than a carniverous plant that fed on animal victims when they came its way, and laid dormant until its appetite was awakened by the presence of live flesh.

He hurried on, but suddenly stopped, for on the floor near him he saw a small pile of bones. They were the bones of some animal, probably about the size of a dog. No doubt the animal, whatever it might have been, had wandered into the passage in some manner and had been eaten by the blood-red fungus.

Farther on his way he saw unmistakable evidences that the plant was flesh-eating or absorbing, for human bones were plentiful. Had this been a sacrifice-place, or place of execution for the Aztecs? This thought haunted him, and he pressed forward at greater speed. What if Stella had come into such a passage as this unseeing and unknowing, and been unable to defend herself against these clinging things in the darkness.

Then suddenly he came to the end of the passage, where it closed against a wall.

He turned back in dismay, for he dreaded to pass through the horrible growth of red fungus again. But do it he must, and the sooner he got through it the sooner he could forget it.

But as he went back he observed that the thin and faint growth of red he had passed a few minutes before was now several inches high, and as he passed between it it reached out its dainty tentacles toward him, weaving them in an animal way. This caused him to hurry on, for ahead of him the way looked red with the stuff.

He felt something tug at his ankle, and looking down was horrified to discover that one of the tentacles had taken hold of him, but as it seemed to have no power to hold anything except flesh he soon kicked it off and pressed on.

The fungi was growing larger both as to length and in circumference as he advanced. Far ahead it assumed the proportions of the handle of a hoe, and was quite as tall, and easily reached the center of the passage from either side.

Ted was now really alarmed. He drew his knife, determined to cut and slash if the creatures attacked him. Where he had first seen the stuff the passage seemed to be full of the squirming red tentacles.

He made a rush to get through it, but as he entered the mass of squirming things, that seemed alive, one of them grasped his wrist, extinguishing the candle. He felt the horror of his situation, and grasping his knife in the other hand severed the fungus close to his arm.

But other tentacles were feeling for him in the dark. He could feel them sweep past his face, and they had a nauseous smell. One clutched him by the throat, and began to fasten itself tightly about him. He cut it away, and then ran through the mass, slashing and cutting desperately. Several times he felt himself being dragged back by these vegetable creatures, but he managed to escape, and finally extricated himself, and stood panting beyond them.

Relighting his candle, he turned his back on the things and fled.

Suddenly he stopped as if shot, and began to feel in his pockets. His candles were gone. He thought they must have been jarred from his pocket when he was running.

He looked at the candle in his hand. Hardly more than an inch of it remained, and he was lost.

But he kept on walking swiftly, wishing for a sight of the glow of the boys' candles, but there seemed to be no such cheerful prospect, for in front of him was the velvety blackness, and in his hand a half-inch of candle.

But now that he was out of the passage of the man eating plants he felt even cheerful.

Then the candle began to gutter and go out. He nursed the flame as long as he could, but it expired and left him in the dark.

He stumbled on briskly, for the passage was dry and there seemed no possibility of running into the red tentacles again.

Suddenly he ran violently against something, for he was hurrying along as fast as he could, and it yielded. He placed his hand upon it, and it seemed to be a rocky substance, and yet it was going away from him. Oh, for a light to see what was this new horror!

There was a gush of light, and he heard voices of men exclaiming in wonder, and suddenly he was in a large room.

Seated at a desk in the middle of the room was a stout dark man with a stern face, and Ted recognized instantly a high official of Mexico. Sitting near him were two men, who were staring at him as if they had seen a ghost. One of them was the man with the forked beard.

Ted gazed about him in wonder, but was brought back to earth again when the official swung round in his chair and looked at him coldly, saying:

"Well, what is the meaning of this?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Ted. "I wish I did."

"How did you come here, and what is your business?" asked the official.

"I came through a passage in the dark, and ran into a wall which yielded to my pressure, and here I am. I assure you, I am as much surprised as you are."

"Who are you?" was the official's next query.

Before Ted could answer the man with the forked beard spoke up.

"I can tell you, excellency," he said. "This young man is a friend of mine. He is one of the young Americans of whom we have been talking. His name is Ted Strong, and in the United States is an officer in a similar capacity as myself, but in a different line of work."

"He seems very young," said the official.

"Nevertheless, he is very brave and resourceful. Now that you know that I know him, and will be responsible for him, I wish you would permit me to consult him privately, as he is my countryman."

The official nodded his head, and the man with the forked beard arose.

"I will turn him over to you, Captain Tosta, but do not forget that I am responsible for him," said the third man in the room, who had ben eying Ted keenly ever since his sensational entrance.

"Very well, general," said Captain Tosta.

At that moment the door crashed open, and a wild eyed man with torn and disheveled clothes sprang into the room, followed by a soldier with a torn uniform and a bruised face.

It was Losteros, who, when he saw Ted, gave a cry like a wild animal.

"At last!" he cried, "I have you, dog of a gringo. You, who have ruined me! Now for revenge!"

There was the light of insanity in his eyes, as with a howl he launched himself upon Ted, brandishing a long knife in his hand.

Ted had not time to defend himself, as he was so close to Losteros that the Mexican had only to cross the space of a half-dozen feet to be upon him. Captain Tosta drew his hand from his hip pocket.

The knife was descending when a shot rang out, and Losteros shriveled up and sank to the floor, to which his knife fell with a crash.

CHAPTER XII.

THE REAPPEARANCE OF DON DORRINGTON.

As Losteros died, the official showed more coolness than any other man in the room. He summoned soldiers, who bore away the body.

"Come," said the mysterious man, whom they had called Captain Tosta, to Ted, leading the way into an anteroom.

When they were there, and the door closed, Captain Tosta drew from his pocket a golden chain, the links of which were joined by sapphires.

Ted stared from the chain to Captain Tosta in amazement.

"Great Scott, how did you come by that?" asked Ted. It was the chain which Losteros had slipped down the drain-pipe in St. Louis.

"I found it," said the captain, with an inscrutable smile. "It shot down to me from Heaven, via a drain-pipe."

"I don't understand it, at all," said Ted.

"Nothing easier. I will reveal myself to you once more," said Captain Tosta, stripping the beard from his face, to become, plus some stain on his face, the redoubtable Darbey O'Neill.

"What in the world are you doing so close to this man?" stammered Ted, indicating the high Mexican official.

"I am the secret servant of our country, intervening in certain cases, making smooth the way of our fellow countrymen, for convenience a Mexican officer attached to the household of his excellency, who, of course knows very well who and what I am. At present serving our country and unearthing the scandals in his secret service and remodeling it. It was while doing this that I discovered that young Dorrington had apparently discovered the hiding-place of the treasure hidden by the Aztecs at the time of Montezuma."

"How did you learn that?" asked Ted.

"Through your friend Losteros, to whom peace. I knew that he and several traitorous officers of the secret service and the army were bent on learning the whereabouts of the treasure, murdering Dorrington, yourself, and your young friends, and making away with the treasure, which, when you think it over, belongs to the Mexican Government."

"I had been thinking the same, and when I saw Dorrington I intended telling him so."

Darbey O'Neill laughed.

"So you have not seen Dorrington, eh? Well, you soon will. He has been captured. Now I have talked the matter over with his excellency, and have shown him how the matter stands. You boys have found the treasure, and you only know where it is hidden. We know

now that it is underneath the Castle of Chepultepec. We caught Dorrington at the entrance. You have the treasure, we have you. His excellency agrees with me that we should share it with one another. You see I am speaking for Mexico and pleading for your safety. Do you catch me?"

"I do, and I agree with you heartily."

"I knew you would, but Dorrington is quite frantic over it, and has caused no end of disturbance, having thrashed every guard we have put over him, but I think a few words from you will quiet him. Some one has used too much diplomacy for a hearty young American to swallow, and he made the best reply he could, which was with his fists. We will see him soon, and then we will quiet him."

"Then hurry, for a young lady belonging to our party has been lost in the passages that honeycomb the rock. In searching for her I lost my way, and broke into the council-chamber, for such I suppose it is."

"In a few minutes. I wanted to tell you that it was only yesterday that we discovered that some one was beneath the castle. We heard strange explosions underneath the floors, and fearing earthquake a rigid search was made, and the hole in the cellar was found. A slight search was made, but was discontinued when the extent of the tunnels and passages became apparent. We knew that you were in there, and would have to come out, and like a dog at a rat-hole we have been watching for our prey. That was how we caught Dorrington."

"We might have known it. But you have forgotten that there is another exit to the place known only to Dorrington. We might have escaped that way."

"No, for I have every foot of the rock watched, even the inn of old Pauncito, where you all met the night you went in. We knew you were there, but Losteros, rest him, was too hasty and spoiled it all for personal revenge, and perhaps greed."

"But I cannot understand your seeming omnipresence in the matter in St. Louis. You seemed to be everywhere."

"I had several disguises. When the Mexican secret service first became aware that the treasure, for which they had been looking for many years, was probably the secret of Don Dorrington, the department went about wringing the secret from that young man. After Losteros, who bungled the thing all the way through, had murdered his uncle, I took a hand in it myself. I followed Dorrington to St. Louis, and by means in my possession I was able to read his letter to you, and when you appeared in St. Louis, I was there to watch the game. When I recovered the piece of mulberry paper and the diagrams, I made careful copies of them all before returning them to you. Where we all made the mistake was in not realizing sooner that the diagram referred to the Rock of Chepultepec, on the assumption, I suppose, that treasure cannot be found near home. And now that we are agreed, and upon your promise that you will help me, we will return to the council-chamber. Remember, as yet you are practically a prisoner in charge of General Alvarado, whom you saw in the chamber a few moments ago, and are on parole to me."

"I understand."

"And if you can persuade Dorrington to our way of thinking you will lead us to where the treasure is?"

"Certainly. I shall be glad to get rid of the responsibility. The sight of so much wealth has sickened me."

"What would be wealth to you would be a mere bagatelle to a needy nation with many reforms and public improvements in contemplation," said Darbey O'Neill, leading the way into the chamber.

The official and General Alvarado, of the secret service, were sitting in the same places they had occupied when Ted made his sensational entrance, the former as imperturbable as ever.

Captain Tosta was himself again, and nodded slightly to the official, who touched a button on the top of his desk.

In a few moments there was the sound of a violent struggle in the next room, accompanied by the cries of men in anger and in pain. The door flew open and three diminutive soldiers struggled in, lugging a girl whose costly lace dress was torn, and whose face was red with anger, as she flung the soldiers about like a dog worrying a rat.

"What does this mean? This is shameful!" cried Ted, starting forward. "Gentlemen, this is Señorita Asturias who is suffering violence at the hands of these soldiers. I will not permit it."

"Wait a minute," exclaimed Captain Tosta, interfering and giving a sharp command.

Instantly the soldiers released her.

"Who are you?"

"Don Dorrington," said the "señorita," tearing off the abundance of black hair which Ted had so admired.

The soldiers looked on in amazement, and their wonder at the strength exhibited by the young girl vanished.

"Well, I'll be—be jiggered," was all Ted could gasp.

"It's all right, Ted. Never say die," said Don. "Gentlemen, if you will let me go into the next room I shall make myself more presentable."

He looked at Captain Tosta.

"I am responsible for you, Dorrington," said the captain, motioning him to the room in which Ted and he had conferred.

In a few moments Don came out in his own clothing, although it was a mystery how he had managed to conceal it beneath his skirts.

"Now, gentlemen, I am ready for a conference, a fight, or prison, anything to which you can put me and I will stand for," he said coolly.

Captain Tosta and the official looked at one another and smiled.

"A very spirited young man," said the official. "I wish I had an army full of such fellows as he and our friend Ted Strong."

"Don, Ted and I have had a talk, and he agrees with me that you should turn over to the government the treasure you have found."

"And for what reward?" asked Don, shutting his lips closely.

"A fair share for each," said Captain Tosta quietly.

"I have your word personally that it shall be fair?"

"You have my personal word."

"But there is one demand I will make that must be complied with before I will concede anything."

"And that is?"

"Losteros!"

"Come with me."

They left the room together, but were back in a few moments. Don's face was very pale.

"It is all right," he said. "I agree to anything that is agreeable to Ted. What is it you want me to do?"

"Lead us to the treasure. It will be divided generously when its value has been appraised."

"Very well, I trust you. Have torches brought. We will depart through that door," he said, pointing to the door which Ted had pushed open.

"Did you know of its existence?" asked Captain Tosta.

"Certainly. There is no part of the halls of Montezuma I do not know."

The torches had come, and the gentlemen all rose.

"Shall we take a guard?" asked General Alvarado.

"I do not find one necessary," said the official. "I will trust myself to these lads."

"Then we shall start," said Don, lighting a torch. They each took a torch, and led by Don and Ted the party filed into the dark passage and began to descend.

As they walked along Ted and Don had many explanations to make to one another, and the hearty laughter of the boys rang out as they recalled the many embarrassments the disguise of Don as the Señorita Asturias had caused them.

"There is one thing we must do immediately," said Ted seriously. "Stella is lost, and we must find her."

"That we can easily do, for I have a system by which I can go through every passage in an hour and nothing escape me."

"Not even the red fungi?"

"Did you find those?" asked Don. "And you escaped?"

"By the skin of my teeth."

"What was that?" asked Don, stopping.

The laughter of a young girl rang through the passages.

"It is Stella," said Ted. The laughter sounded unnatural and weird, echoing back from those black walls. A thought flashed through Ted's mind. Could it be that the fear of being alone in these dark and terrible tunnels had made the poor girl mad?

He chilled at the thought, but saw a faint glow against the roof of the tunnel just ahead, and laughed himself.

In a moment they turned a corner, and saw Stella sitting amidst a group of the boys, laughing and telling the story of her wanderings.

Ted gave a shout, which brought the boys to their feet with revolvers in their hands, their eyes peering into the darkness beyond.

"It's all right," shouted Ted, and the young rough riders gave the long yell, which made the passages roar with echoes.

Soon Stella and the boys were presented to the high Mexican official, and everything was explained.

"Come, sir," said Ted. "We will take a look at the treasure."

They had only a few steps to go, and as Ted ushered the official into Montezuma's treasure house, the veteran whom nothing could disturb gave a gasp.

"Stupendous!" was all he could say, as he wrung the hands of Ted and Don.

All during that day the boys labored, carrying out the vast treasure.

Later it was appraised, Captain Tosta representing the boys.

Some of the finest jewels were selected by the official himself and presented to Stella and Señora Figuero with the compliments of the Republic of Mexico.

A large share of the treasure fell to the boys, which was held in trust for them by Ted until it could be profitably invested.

But Don's proportion was great enough to make that young man suddenly and immensely wealthy, and he went abroad to finish his studies in engineering.

Ted and the boys were greatly honored by the Mexican cabinet, which gave a dinner and a great ball in their honor, and when they departed from the City of Mexico they went to the boundary-line escorted by Captain Tosta and a party of army officers.

THE END.

The next number of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, No. 141, entitled "King of the Wild West's Totem; or, Stella Makes a New Maxim," takes Ted Strong and his brave comrades into Northern Minnesota in obedience to a request from Washington that he go there and defend the wards of the nation from the rapacity of the men who have been despoiling the Indians. His success is told in a series of chapters brimming over with adventure. This story shows Ted's nerve, nimbleness of wit, and the other qualities which have made his reputation as the most adventurous boy in America.

A CHAT WITH YOU.

EDITORIAL NOTE.—The deluge of letters of praise pouring into our editorial rooms has impelled us to open this department, where, from week to week, we may meet our multitude of enthusiastic young readers and answer various questions concerning sports afield. If you desire to know anything connected with outdoor life, hunting, fishing, fur-collecting, or cowboy life on the plains, ask freely [illegible] our [illegible] we have editors who are thoroughly posted in all that pertains to healthy sport in the open. In many cases we may have to abbreviate letters; but it shall be our aim to print everything that we believe must prove of interest to the great body of readers. We shall also, when not requested otherwise, give the address as an evidence of good faith.

I am an old reader of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and feel that for this reason I will not be taking too much liberty in asking you a question which has been puzzling me for some time. It is about the ranches down in Mexico. I have read of Ted and the rough riders going down to the sister republic from time to time, after outlaws and bandits, and riding over the large ranches. The author has always spoken of them as if they were of immense size, but he has never told us just how big they are. Judging from what he has said, I have got the idea that they are as large, and perhaps larger, than the ones we hear of in this country. I wish that you would answer this question, because it is one of general interest, and other readers would probably like to know about them also. KERN HORNBLOWER

Boston, Mass.

We take pleasure in answering this question, for, as you say, it is one that interests our readers generally. The ranches in Mexico are enormous, and are larger than some European kingdoms. Just think of a private citizen owning more land than a royal personage. Yet such is the case with the ranches situated on the other side of the Rio Grande. Properties of 1,000,000 and 2,000,000 acres are not uncommon. Ted Strong has big ranches in various parts of the West, but none of them are as [illegible] as these interminable stretches of pasturage in Mexico, owned by wealthy individuals. The following is a list of some of the principal owners, and the size of their property in acres: Ex-Governor Terrazas, of Chihuahua has 17,000,000 acres. The Zuloaga family is said to hold 5,000,000. Among the Americans who have large ranches may be mentioned Fleming & Ross, the Riverside Cattle Company, with 2,000,000 acres and a fine herd of Herefords; Phœbe Hearst, of California, who has a magnificent place west of Minaca; the Millers, and the three Mormon colonies. Gordon, Ironsides & Ferriss, a Canadian company, have 1,000,000 acres; Lord Beresford, a relative of the admiral, has a large ranch where he raises fine horses; another Englishman, named Irmstead, owns a large property. Smaller places of from 40,000 acres upward are numerous. The price of land now runs from 50 to 75 cents gold per acre, with a strong tendency to rise.

(A letter from North Dakota.)

I have read every number of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLIES from No. 1 to date, and must say it is the best weekly of its kind published. The characters of these stories are first-class in every respect, and the descriptions of Western life are very realistic. My favorites are Ted, Bud, Ben Tremont, and Carl Schwartz. Bud is a first-class cow-puncher, and never fails to amuse us by his adventures "down on the Pecos," and by telling Ben that he is "an overgrown college dude who smokes a stunted pipe." Carl Schwartz likes his meals very much, from what I have heard. I can truthfully say that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is king of all the Western stories published. Of course, there are other stories of Western life that are written in a style that cannot fail to please the boys. The ROUGH RIDER stories are fascinating, and hold the attention of the reader from chapter one to the end. I have read numbers of weeklies describing the West as it was, or is, and must say they are—well, there are a number of words that could be used to describe them, some of which are not in Webster's Dictionary. In such stories you [illegible] notice that the hero is looked upon as a sort of supernatural being, and is feared wherever his name is heard, and that the other characters, including villains of the worst description, are afraid to say a word against him or his pards. [illegible] so-called stories may catch the fancy of some [illegible] no idea of what is really the West, but they [illegible] for me. I would advise the boys who are searching for [illegible] story to invest in a copy or two of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. It certainly is "heap good medicine." A loyal rough rider.

J. J. MEALY.

This is one of the most interesting Chat letters that we have had the pleasure of reading for some time. Our readers will find this letter well worth their perusal. Write again, and try for the prize offered for the best letter from ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY readers.

I take pleasure in saying a word for the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and also in recommending it to all who [illegible] read a clean book about the Wild West. It is interesting from [illegible] cover. Bud Morgan and the rest of the boys have [illegible] of fun, which makes you laugh. Ted certainly [illegible] of King of the Wild West, and it is wonderful how [illegible] through close shaves.

A better man could not be found to fill the office of [illegible] marshal than Ted Strong, who ranks high in my [illegible] and his boys are manly in every way, and every one is brave, courteous, courageous, and gentlemanly. I will now close by saying with a hearty will, "Three cheers for Ted Strong and his rough riders." FRANK W. ADAMS

Charleston, S. C.

You have picked out a fine library. There is nothing better for boys than the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

(A letter from New York.)

I have not been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY until lately. When hunting something to read, I came across a few back numbers, for which I had traded other libraries. I think No. 130 the best Western story I have come across in a long time. A friend of mine reads a similar library, but the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is many times the better of the two. I cannot say too much about the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. SAM SOLOMON.

Whenever you want something good to read, get the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

(A letter from Ontario.)

I have read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for quite awhile [illegible] It is one of my favorites, and I think it is as good as any other book I have read. It certainly is the best book of Wild West stories I ever heard of. WILLIE T. TAMBLING.

Ted has many friends in Canada. He is just as popular up there as he is on this side of the line.

(A letter from Tennessee.)

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for [illegible] time. I think it is a fine book for boys to read. I like [illegible] because he does the right thing to everybody. I hope you will publish the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for years to come. I read all other books you print, but the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY and *Buffalo Bill* are ahead of them all. Ted Strong is a model, [illegible] way of thinking. The name, King of the Wild West, suits him finer than silk. Ted has been in many a tight place, but [illegible] always come out with a whole skin.

Bidding Street & Smith good-by, I will close. R. L. PALMER.

Ted never gets into a bad scrape but he manages to get out of it.

(A letter from Maine.)

I write to you to tell you that I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY has the best Western stories ever written.

I am a young girl of 14, and I have read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY from the first number. Once I get to reading one, I cannot drop it till I have read it through; for, of all stories of adventure I have read, I think those of Ted Strong are the best.

ENOA MYSHRALL.

Our readers are always glad to see letters from girls in the Chat column. Write again when the spirit moves you.

(A letter from Maine.)

I can say that I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLIES are the best novels I have read, and I have read them from No. 1 up to date. WALDO LEAVITT.

An admirer of Ted Strong and his rough riders writes us from "down East" to tell us what he thinks of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

(A letter from Wisconsin.)

I think that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best weekly that I ever read. It is a good weekly, because it is all about border life, which is the kind I like. I like Ted Strong because he is not cruel. MAURICE READ.

Ted Strong is brave and courageous; he hates everything that is not manly and upright.

(A letter from Pennsylvania.)

I certainly think that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY stories are the best I ever read. They are full of exciting adventure, the kind that we boys like to read about. C. P. ROSS.

Write again soon.

(A letter from Wyoming.)

I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the finest of its kind. I read it nearly every week. I would read them all the time if I did not have to work. ROY MILLER.

The pleasantest time one could have would be reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY day after day.

It won't be very hard to say a good word for the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. It's a "dandy," and no mistake about it. Ned Taylor knows what the boys want. I would rather go without cream in my coffee than do without my ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY!
Los Angeles, Cal. FRANK BURRESS, JR.

You are very enthusiastic over Ned Taylor's stories, and there is a good reason for it—you are reading the finest stories of Western life being published to-day.

(A letter from Minnesota.)

I have always said a good word for the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY to my friends and others. They are buying it every week now, as well as myself. I like Ted Strong, Bud Morgan, Ben Tremont, Kit Summers, Bob Martin, Clay Whipple, and Beanpole.

I like the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY very much. It is so interesting that I can sit up and read it till 12 o'clock at night. When you begin with one of them, you can't quit before you have finished it. I have bought many other libraries, but, when I found the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, I thought it the most interesting of them all. MARTIN K. BAKKO.

The ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY appeals to all readers who like an interesting story, because there is always something to hold one's attention in these romances.

(A letter from Missouri.)

I am going to continue reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLIES, for they are very interesting. I did not think there were such stories until a short time ago, when I happened to pick one up that belonged to a friend. I read it, and am still reading about Ted; and I highly prize the library. WALTER O. RAMSEY.

You like the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY so much that you will always read it.

(A letter from Ohio.)

I read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and must say it is very good. Ted Strong is a strong and interesting man.

I have read a number of ROUGH RIDER WEEKLIES, and like them, and so do my brothers and sisters. I think that of all the Western weeklies, the ROUGH RIDER ranks first. JOHN SABIN.

In the front rank of boys' publications you will see the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

(A letter from Kentucky.)

I am a reader of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and think it the best paper published. No. 130 is one of the best issues, and I think Stella and Ted should marry. WILLIE HENDRICKSON.

So you think that Ted and Stella should marry? What do the rest of our readers think about it? We should like to have their opinion on this question. Perhaps some think that the interest would cease in Stella in that case. Perhaps she would have to stay home and look after the household duties, and could not find time to accompany Ted on his chase after outlaws. But then, again, she might be with Ted in camp all the more. In that case we might hear more of Stella. There are two sides to this question, and we should like to have it decided by our readers.

(A letter from Iowa.)

I think that Ted was near death when the avalanche of snow covered him up, and he probably would have died had it not been for the old dog. He also came near getting hanged. I surely think that Lucky Sid was lucky in having his life saved by Ted when he nearly drowned, and he was also lucky in getting a fortune from the meteor. ERNEST JACKSON.

Ted and Lucky Sid had a strenuous time of it up in Alaska.

(A letter from Kentucky.)

I have read quite a number of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLIES, and like them. SILAS MITCHELL.

The ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY contains fascinating stories of life in the great West.

(A letter from Indiana.)

Stella is a good shot, and I don't think I would fancy her pointing a loaded gun at me. CHESTER FIELDS, JR.

Stella is a crack shot, and never misses. She is the best marksman in the West to-day, excepting, of course, Ted Strong, the King of the Wild West.

(A letter from Michigan.)

I think that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best of its kind ever published.

I read your other weeklies alternatively each week, but with the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY there is no alternative. I read them every week.

Ted is all O. K. Bud is what they call a "hurricane on wheels." As for the rest, they are all there from A to Z. Mr. Taylor knows his "biz." CHAS. WILLIS.

This letter shows how popular the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is among boys of the West.

The ROUGH RIDER WEEKLIES are the best I've read, because they have something in them that can really and truly happen. I get them every week. LEOPOLD ROMANSKY.
New York City.

Nothing improbable happens in these stories. Everything is true to life. Readers recognize this, and for that reason speak of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY as being the best library of its kind.

(A letter from New Hampshire.)

I can honestly say that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best magazine for the money I ever read. Being a Westerner myself, and being brought up in the saddle, I may say that these stories sound very like the true Western life. I am a student in the Phillips Exeter Academy, one of the largest preparatory schools in the United States, and I have recommended the magazine to a number of fellow students. A. McC. PARKER, JR.

The stories in the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY are true to life. All Western readers say that the author describes the conditions out West with the pen of a man who knows the country he is writing about.

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139—King of the Wild West Rides the Line; or, Stella Saves Old Glory.
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Now, we intend to make it worth the while of every boy to tell us just what he thinks about the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY and hereby offer valuable prizes to those who write us the best letters regarding the stories themselves; how you may have worked to increase their circulation or what you know about the fascinating life of the modern ranchman, so ably described by our cowboy author, Mr. Ned Taylor. We would particularly appreciate receiving letters from our Western friends.

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